

Roads to Nowhere? Cycling, Happiness and Emotional Authenticity
in Contemporary German Fiction

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This article compares a selection of recent German literary representations of cycling, a form of transport that, I shall argue, deserves a place in contemporary discourses of slow travel. As Jon Day notes of travel writing in general, these discourses are “so often associated with shoe rather than saddle,” with writers seeking value mainly in pedestrian mobilities such as walking, climbing and running (Day 8). I will seek to expand the framework of discussions of slow travel with a comparative focus on four fictional treatments of the experience of cycling in German novels, one from the 1980s, and three more recent texts published between 2016 and 2018: *Der Mann auf dem Hochrad* (‘The Man on the Penny Farthing’ 1984) by Uwe Timm, *Im Sommer wieder Fahrrad* (‘I’ll Cycle Again in the Summer’ 2016) by Lea Streisand, *Im Feld* (‘In the Field’, 2018) by Joachim Zelter and *Neujahr* (‘New Year’ 2018) by Juli Zeh.¹ My reading of the texts locates their treatment of cycling within a broader reflection upon slow travel as a non-functional, affective and authentic practice which is experienced as a fundamental contrast to everyday life. Cycling in these texts is seldom presented primarily as a mode of transport or means to an end. Instead, the act itself is seen to have an inherent value arising from the physical demands of cycling, from the intimacy between rider and bicycle, and from the resultant transformative experience of topography and space.

None of these German novels are only about cycling: Timm’s novel can be read, as we shall see, as a study of social change; Streisand’s as a treatment of mortality, female experience, and creativity; Zelter’s as an allegory of life, as Alexander Kluy in *Der Standard* suggests in his review; and Zeh’s novel as a commentary on aspects of neoliberal society, or as a meditation, in the view of Karin Janker writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on masculinity and the consequences of equality and female emancipation. However, what a comparative reading of the texts reveals, in the context of the broader discourses around slow travel, tourism and cycling, is that they do much more than simply deploy the bicycle as motif or metaphor or as plot device. In the context of a renewed interest in cycling, both in Germany and internationally, and not least also because the novelists themselves are passionate about cycling (and in Zeh’s case other outdoor pursuits), they offer real insights into the interconnected physical, intellectual and emotional impacts of cycling.

The German setting shared by the texts (with the exception of Zeh’s tale of German tourists in the Canary Islands, a destination visited by 2.9 million Germans per year) should be understood in the context of a long-established

¹ None of my primary texts has been translated into English. All translations are my own.

cultural attachment to the bicycle. Of course, Germany has no grand tour to match the Tour de France or the Giro d'Italia, and is, internationally, better known for its cars and the unrestricted speed of its *Autobahnen*. Yet cycling has long been an integral part of everyday life in Germany in a way that is only really matched in Western Europe by the cycling culture of the Netherlands and Belgium. Cycling as a motif has rarely taken center stage in German cultural production, but it is telling, as my selection of texts reflects, that it has recently become more noticeable. The proportion of journeys made by bicycle has been steadily increasing in Germany in recent years. In the city of Bremen, one of Germany's most bicycle-friendly cities, they now account for 18.9% of all journeys (still a considerably smaller share than in the Netherlands, where in Utrecht the figure is as high as 51% and the national figure is 30%, but far higher than any British or French city), and in many regions, especially in the less mountainous north, cycling is an established mode of daily transport (Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik). The city of Münster in North Rhine-Westphalia is ranked, according to a comprehensive comparative survey (Coya.com) taking account of everything from infrastructure to safety, as the second-best "bicycle city" in the world (behind Utrecht, but ahead of Antwerp and Copenhagen).

This is a product, in part, of an historical love-affair with the bicycle that stretches back to its invention (in the first recognizably modern form) by the German Baron Karl von Drais, who patented his "Laufmaschine" 'running machine' in Mannheim in 1817, and to the era of its popularisation in Germany in the late nineteenth century (Hadland and Lessing 8-19). Initially cycling, which had been further developed in Britain, was limited to a wealthy elite, but this changed as industrially manufactured bicycles became more affordable. By the turn of the twentieth century the bicycle had become a symbol of working-class identity and mobility across Europe. Workers' cycling clubs, such as the National Clarion Cycling Club in Britain and, in Germany, the *Arbeiter-Radfahrerbund Solidarität* ('Solidarity Workers' Cycling Club'), founded in 1896 (and still in existence today) established a cultural association between cycling and workers (see Krüger; Riordan). The Solidarität club manufactured and sold their own inexpensive bicycle to members, which numbered 100,000 by 1908. As Arnd Krüger writes: "While cycling still retained its upper-class appeal, gradually the well-to-do switched to motorcycles and motor cars, and the bicycle became an important means of transport and leisure for the working class" (Krüger 7).² This in turn fuelled the growth of cycle sport in Germany, with track racing and the famous six-day races, held at venues such as the Sportpalast in Berlin, proving to be wildly popular as mass spectacles in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the 1920s the most successful cyclists

² Vivid visual evidence of the importance of the bicycle for the working classes is provided by the socialist film *Kuhle Wampe* (originally released in the USA as *Whither Germany?*) (Slatan Dudow, Germany, 1932), in which unemployed workers cycle around Berlin, forming a sort of accidental peloton, in the search for work. The theme is even more central to the famous postwar neo-realist film *Ladri de biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*) (Vittorio De Sica, Italy, 1948).

became popular heroes who were matched only by film stars and the best-known boxers.

To consider cycling a form of “slow” travel would have made little sense to the early adopters of the bicycle. The invention of the bicycle, its refinement through technological ingenuity, and its mass production and widespread adoption, belong to a modernity that often defined itself through urbanization, mobility (both literal and social), and speed or “tempo”. Writing in 1931, Aldous Huxley compares speed to a drug: “Speed, it seems to me, provides the one genuinely modern pleasure” (Huxley 255). He reflects on the “inebriating effects of speed” (as well as the possible ill effects of an excess of it) (Huxley 256). When the modern bicycle was introduced in the nineteenth century, in an age in which walking remained the only affordable option for the majority, it was associated with breathtaking speed. With the emergence of track and road racing as an organized international sport during the 1880s, cyclists achieved hero status with feats of speed and endurance. Even as late as the teens of the twentieth century, the bicycle seemed still to belong to a mechanized, futuristic cityscape as much as trains, cars and airplanes, as evidenced by the Expressionist and Futurist visual depictions of cycle sport in works by Lyonel Feininger (‘Cyclists,’ 1912), Jean Metzinger (‘At the Velodrome,’ 1912), Umberto Boccioni (‘Dynamism of a Cyclist,’ 1913), Natalia Goncharova (‘The Cyclist,’ 1913), and others. A key feature of these works is the apparent mechanization of the specialized human body, what Bernard Vere refers to as a “fusion of professional man and precision machine” (Vere 1160).

More than a century later the bicycle is naturally viewed very differently but cycling still sometimes seems to be culturally bound up with motifs of speed and competition. As a sport and a pastime, it tends to be dominated by men, with the figures of the lycra-clad racer and the reckless cycle courier looming large in media representations of cycling. Yet it is worth recalling that cycling has, from the outset, also been celebrated through discourses of liberation, self-determination and independence. The emergence of cycle-touring, and alongside it new forms of “rational” (practical) dress for both male and female cyclists, helped to break down gender barriers towards the end of the restrictive Victorian age (see Jungnickel). For women, the potential for independent mobility offered by the bicycle was especially significant, intersecting with the drive for emancipation and equality. For the “New Woman” of the late nineteenth century, as Katrina Jungnickel has shown, “cycling became viewed not only as a means of physically getting somewhere but of enacting new forms of socio-political and gendered mobility” (Jungnickel 366). Today the focus of grass-roots cycling advocacy movements, such as Critical Mass, is on a different type of liberation—their goal is to free cities from the stranglehold of the motorcar. As cycling undergoes another global “boom,” the bicycle is once again central to debates around urban planning, transport, health and tourism. To declare oneself a cyclist is to do more than make a reference to one’s commuting method—it is a statement about one’s philosophy of life.

Yet, especially given its mechanical, and thus mediate nature, cycling might still seem antithetical to the meditative slowness, “inner silence,” and above all the pleasure of walking. The latter is the subject of a recent essay by Erling Kagge, whose decelerated vision of the act is reflected in the reference to “one step at a time” included in the title of his essay. Yet Kagge’s reflection on walking allows for a spectrum of experience, and he notes that pleasure, in the form of a sense of wellbeing, can also be achieved through both physical and mental discomfort, for example by walking great distances, traversing difficult environments (Kagge describes an expedition to walk the sewer system of New York City), or climbing to the summit of a mountain, carrying only the “bare essentials.” This, he writes, has always given him “a good feeling, a feeling of freedom” (Kagge 98). The idea that a feeling of wellbeing, or even happiness, might come from undertaking something arduous or difficult is a peculiarly modern idea. Zygmunt Bauman suggests in *The Art of Life* that the modern era has seen the achievement of a “state of happiness” replaced by a process, “the pursuit of happiness:” “the greatest happiness has been and continues to be associated with the satisfaction derived from defying the odds and overcoming the obstacles, rather than with the rewards to be found at the far end of protracted defiance and long struggle” (Bauman 29). It is in this respect—as performance and process, and as a challenging yet liberating outdoor activity—that cycling’s affinity with walking, and its capacity to produce something like happiness, becomes evident.

Although it depends on a form of mechanized transport, cycling shares a number of key features with walking or running: it is a form of human-powered locomotion requiring physical effort; it brings the individual into a relationship with the topographical and environmental; it is a form of sustainable, eco-friendly transport; and the cyclist, like the pedestrian, is typically figured as a vulnerable road user, defined by an ambivalent, often fractious relationship, if not outright conflict, with roads and urban spaces in which motorized traffic is prioritized. The Mexican essayist Valeria Luiselli has attempted to celebrate the “drifting,” leisurely urban cyclist as a contemporary equivalent to the historical figure of the pedestrian *flâneur*—the “cycleur” is a liberated practitioner of cycling as “one of the few street activities that can still be thought of as an end in itself” (Luiselli 407). “The cyclist,” she suggests, “in contrast to the person travelling by car, achieves that lulling unworried speed which frees thought and allows it to go along *a piacere* [at will]” (Luiselli 402). Luiselli is, clearly, uninterested in functional cycling, whether for work or sport. In recent years, as Day observes in the context of the decline of bicycle couriers as a service industry, the bicycle “has been re-appropriated, not as a tool for work, but as a vehicle for leisure” (Day 65). As such, attempts to articulate the experience of cycling, as in the case of walking and running, often focus on the emotional response it generates—especially feelings of happiness, well-being or other intense emotion—and of a form of what I will refer to here as emotional authenticity, lacking in more functional, faster forms of transport.

The association between outdoor activity and experience of a more “authentic” or true version of the self has a long tradition. It is famously present, for example, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*), in which “wandering” and mountain climbing are central motifs of self-discovery and aspiration: “Und was mir nun auch noch als Schicksal und Erlebniss [sic] komme,--ein Wandern wird darin sein und ein Bergsteigen: man erlebt endlich nur noch sich selber” (IV 193). ‘And whatever may still overtake me as fate and experience—a wandering will be therein and a mountain-climbing. In the end one experienceth only oneself’ (103). More recently, comparable motifs of self-improvement and self-discovery have underpinned public health campaigns such as “Sport for All,” publishing trends promoting activities such as wild swimming as a path to happiness or way to “discover your inner adventurer” (Hudson), and tendencies in leisure and tourism. Britta Timm Knudsen and Anne Marit Waade, reflecting on the relevance of “emotional geography” to tourism, have observed that authenticity has in recent years become decoupled from specific sites or objects (and the vexed question of if and how an ‘authentic’ experience of a tourist destination can be facilitated) and become “something experienced through the body, through performance” (Knudsen and Waade 31). This explains both how slow, or perhaps more accurately non-functional, travel can become an end in itself, and why cycling, which encompasses a spectrum of physical performance from Luiselli’s leisurely *cycleur* to the extremes of suffering and exhaustion experienced by stage-racers, time-triallists and ultra-cyclists, offers the same potential for emotional authenticity as walking.

My readings here focus on the apparent hunger for emotional authenticity, understood as the subjective experience of truth—one’s true self, and true emotions—which stands in contrast to everyday situations experienced as mediated or artificial. In each case, cycling as performance is an important means through which an attempt is made to satisfy this hunger. This quest runs like a thread through the narratives, but the goal remains tellingly elusive and impermanent. This is certainly true of Timm’s *Der Mann auf dem Hochrad*, which, like his later *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* (*The Invention of Curried Sausage*, 1993) takes the form of a family legend in which historical is less important than subjective truth. The playful narrative purports to reconstruct the early life of Timm’s uncle Franz Schröter, a taxidermist in the Bavarian town Coburg who had pioneered the introduction of the British penny farthing (then known as an “ordinary”) bicycle in the late nineteenth century. Its comical narrative charts Franz’s near-fanatical advocacy of the notoriously impractical, precarious machine in the face of local resistance and, eventually, the arrival of the more practical “safety” bicycle (“Niederrad”).

Timm is sensitive to the experiential and emotional impact of cycling in a period in which it was yet to be normalized, and in which, in fact, it could be seen as socially radical. In a central chapter, the narrator describes the day trip Schröter and his wife Anna, who has taught herself to ride in secret, undertake together on their penny farthings. Their outing is intended by Schröter to be a

form of visible propaganda, a demonstration of the virtues of the penny farthing for both men and women; yet it becomes a day on which they look back in old age as the happiest of their lives. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Schröter und Anna fuhren die Judengasse hinunter, vorbei an Fenstern, hinter denen sich heimlich Gardinen bewegten, kamen zum Bahnhof, wo eben mit schrillum Pfeifen der Morgenzug nach Sonneberg auslief, neben dem sie im gleichen Tempo herfuhren. Sie sahen, wie der Heizer Kohlen ins Feuer warf. Der Zug wurde schneller, und die graue Rauchwolke verschwand im tiefhängenden Nebel. Sie fuhren auf dem mit Katzenköpfen gepflasterten Kanonenweg hinaus ins freie Land, das in stillem unbewegten Dunst lag. In der Nacht hatte es den ersten leichten Bodenfrost gegeben, die Eschen hatten ihr gelbbraunes Laub abgeworfen. Ihre Gesichter glühten, obwohl die Haut kühl war. Sie fuhren nebeneinander, und Anna mußte immer wieder lachen, weil im hellblonden Schnurrbart von Franz kleine Kondentropfen hingen. Er fuhr ihr mit der Hand unter das Cape und am Rücken hinauf, wobei sie ihn ängstlich ermahnte, doch ja die Spur zu halten. So fuhren sie langsam und ohne Hast über die Landstraße, kamen durch Beiersdorf, wo ein paar Kirchgänger standen und sie stumm anstarrten. Eine Schar Krähen, aufgeschreckt von Schröters Klingeln, ruderte aus einem frisch gepflügten Acker in die Luft. Dann wieder die weite Stille, nur die Fahrgeräusche, von irgendwo ein dunkles Hundebellen. Sie kamen an einen Berg und mußten die Räder hinaufschieben. Als sie oben angekommen waren, atemlos und, ohne die Kühlung des Fahrtwindes, schwitzend, sahen sie, wie der Dunst sich aufhellte und, langsam durchblaut, den Himmel freigab. (Timm 112-13)

Schröter and Anna rode down Judengasse past windows behind which the curtains were secretly twitching, and came to the station where the morning train to Sonneberg was just departing with a shrill whistle, and which they rode alongside at the same speed. They saw the stoker throwing coals into the fire. The train got faster and the grey cloud of smoke disappeared in the low-lying fog. They rode on the cobbled Kanonenweg out into the countryside which was covered in silent, still mist. During the night there had been the first light ground frost, and the ashes had lost their yellow-brown leaves. Their faces were glowing even though their skin was cool. They rode side by side and Anna kept on laughing because little drops of condensation were hanging from Franz's light blond moustache. He stroked her back underneath her cape, which made her nervously remind him to watch where he was riding. And so they rode, slowly and without haste, over the county road, and passed through Beiersdorf, where a few churchgoers stood and watched them silently. A flock of crows, startled by Schröter's bell, took off from a freshly ploughed field. And then there was again only the deep silence,

only the sounds made by the bicycles, and from somewhere the distant sound of a dog barking. They came to a hill and had to push the bicycles up. When they arrived at the top, out of breath and, in the absence of the cooling wind, sweating, they saw the mist clearing, revealing a sky that was slowly turning blue.

The couple's enjoyment is enhanced by a sense of their leaving behind the skeptical community and the modern world, represented by the twitching curtains and the railway, and of peaceful communion with each other and the natural world, reflected in the references to the frost, the trees, the crows, the fields and the silence. The relative slowness of their motion, and the steady physical exertion, clearly play a role in their experience, and the resultant feeling of profound pleasure. Briefly, through the physicality of cycling, the Schröters achieve the emotional authenticity that otherwise eludes them.³ For Schröter, the reluctant taxidermist who is skilled in recreating a compelling but fake version of nature, and who spends his days in various forms of conflict—with customers, townsfolk, employers, and with the feudal, class-bound society—it represents a frustratingly rare glimpse of something natural, or true.

By looking back to the advent of a new form of technology in Germany, Timm's novel functions, as Ted Norris has argued, as "eine profunde ethnographische Studie des sozialen Wandels" (Norris 281) 'a profound ethnographic study of social change.' It is a parable of the paradoxical dynamics of change, as the eccentric protagonist, who campaigns tirelessly to persuade the townsfolk of the virtues of the penny farthing, then stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the far more practical design of the safety bicycle, or to admit that the penny farthing has been superseded. He fails to see the emancipatory potential of cycling, to which Anna remains attracted regardless of the model of bicycle. When Anna eventually decides never to ride again, rather than risk offending her husband by turning to a modern safety bicycle, Franz says nothing. Anna's rebellious independence yields, ultimately, to the patriarchal imperative, in the form of Franz's irrational rejection of progress. The same obstinate passion that characterized Franz's campaign for change now prevents him from adapting to it. This is an apparent betrayal of modernity, as he clings to an impractical mode of transport in denial of the merits of a newer, more efficient one.

Yet his ostensibly reactionary behavior, in particular his advocacy of a slower, more difficult form of travel, requiring a degree of concentration that borders on mindfulness, anticipates later critical commentators of twentieth-century mass tourism and commercialism, such as Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig, and the desire for authenticity and experience that is characteristic of contemporary advocates of slow travel such as Dan Kieran. In 2007 Kieran

³ Elsewhere in Timm's extensive oeuvre a re-engagement with the natural world is achieved through birdwatching, a motif that runs through many of his texts including his most recent novels *Vogelweide* (2013) and *Ikarien* (2017).

travelled across Britain in an electric milk float, a vehicle that is slower than many cyclists, and observes that the pace made him feel a part of the landscape, as opposed to simply traveling “through” it, at speed, in a car (Kieran 144). In Timm’s novel, Franz repeatedly defends the act of riding a penny farthing as inherently valuable because it is difficult, offering an individual, authentic experience that he likens to art: “Er unterschied zwischen Radfahrern und Fahrradfahrern. Der Radfahrer auf dem Hochrad war Artist, der seine innere Balance gefunden hatte. Der Fahrradfahrer auf dem Safety, der Name sagte schon alles, fuhr wie von allein” (Timm 161) ‘He distinguished between true cyclists and riders of safety bicycles. The true cyclist on a penny farthing was an artist who had found his inner balance. The bicycle rider on a “safety”—the name alone told you all you needed to know—rode without having to think.’ In Schröter’s eyes, the effort required to learn to ride a penny farthing raises its value. Norris suggests that the novel’s depiction of the penny farthing as “sinnenschärfend” ‘sharpening the senses’ is central to its critique of social change (Norris 281). In a symbolic episode, Schröter, riding his penny farthing, is comprehensively defeated in a long race against a rival on a safety bicycle, arriving at the finishing line so late that the spectators have given up and gone home. A machine which, as Norris observes, enables full perception of the environment, has been replaced by a simpler invention that makes such a heightening of the senses unnecessary (Norris 281). The forces of modernity, characterized by merciless efficiency, speed and convenience, have, in a way, scored a victory.

Of course, the safety bicycle was itself displaced by yet more convenient modes of transport that further removed the traveler from his or her senses, and from the outside world. Kagge, echoing Kieran’s thoughts about his experience of travelling in a milk float, observes this sensory deprivation by contrasting a car journey with a walk: “When you are in a car driving towards a mountain, with small pools, slopes, rocks, moss and trees zooming past on all sides, life is curtailed; it gets shorter. You don’t notice the wind, the smells, the weather, nor the shifting light. Your feet don’t get sore. Everything becomes one big blur” (Kagge 15-16). Kagge’s point is that the very slowness of walking has the effect of expanding the perception of time.⁴ But as Day (19) observes, cycling also puts the rider in an intimate, often painful relationship with the ground, whose bumps and potholes are felt through the saddle. Luiselli makes a similar point about the cyclist’s intimate sense of the environment, but emphasizing a sense of control, by likening the visual experience of cycling to seeing things “as if through the lens of a movie camera; [the cyclist] can linger on minutiae and choose to pass over what is unnecessary.” (Luiselli 413) The resultant experience is less comfortable but more intense, expansive and authentic than travel by car.

This is a quality that is central to my other, more recent, case-study texts. In Streisand’s autobiographical debut novel *Im Sommer wieder Fahrrad*, as the

⁴ Kagge (18) and Kieran (153) also makes this point.

title implies, the promise of cycling is a prominent motif relating to hope. For the young narrator, who has cancer, this relates not only to a tentative hope for a physical recovery, but also for a regaining of control and a reconnection with a sense of self that is created only in physical performance. The latter is also experienced in her work as performance poet/writer, of which her illness has likewise deprived her. She reflects on this loss of control, and of the sense of self-directed, autonomous living that has become the modern, complacent expectation:

Krebs ist eine Beleidigung unserer durchgestylten Gesellschaft, der Stinkefinger des Schicksals gegen jene, die glauben, mit Fitness-Trackern im Handy und Personal Trainer an der Hand alles im Griff zu haben. . . . Krankheit bedeutet Kontrollverlust, der Körper entzieht sich unserer Souveränität, wir können nichts machen. Wir können nur warten. Warten jedoch widerspricht in jeder Hinsicht unserem Entwurf von selbstbestimmtem Leben. (Streisand 130)

Cancer is an insult to our over-styled society, it's fate flipping the finger to all those people who think they have everything under control with their fitness tracker apps and personal trainers. . . . Illness means a loss of control. The body withdraws itself from our sovereignty, and we can't do anything about it. We can only wait. But waiting completely contradicts our concept of a self-determined life.

The narrator finds comfort, in part, in the reconstruction of the life-story of her assertive, emancipated grandmother, from the Weimar Republic through to the GDR, who embodies authenticity and freedom: "Freiheit bedeutete schließlich, selbstbestimmt zu leben, nach den Prämissen, die man für wichtig hielt" (Streisand 51) 'Freedom ultimately meant living a self-determined life, according to the conditions which you considered important.'

In her own life, with her ability to walk restricted by a minor disability, the physical performance of cycling, even in an urban setting, offers equivalent emotional release and, perhaps paradoxically given the physical nature of cycling, a sense of disembodiment: "Was ich zu Fuß nicht erreiche, gelingt mir, sobald ich mich aufs Fahrrad setze. Hier bin ich der Hindernisse enthoben und kann über sie hinwegfahren. Auf dem Fahrrad kann ich mich selbst und meinen Körper vergessen. (Streisand 52-3) 'I achieve what I can't on foot the moment I get on my bike. Here I am raised above the obstacles and can ride up and over them. On the bike I can forget myself and my body.' At a later point in the narrative, with a return to cycling representing a sense of hope for the future, her memories of summer rides on a tandem with her father allow the narrator to elaborate on cycling as experience and automatic, instinctive process:

Fahrradfahren ist eine intuitive Tätigkeit. Man verschmilzt mit dem Gefährt und wird eins mit ihm. Die Räder werden zu Fortsetzungen der

Beine, der Lenker wird ein Teil des Oberkörpers. Man denkt nicht darüber nach, dass man treten muss, um das Gleichgewicht zu halten, man beschließt nicht, den Lenker zu neigen, um abzubiegen. (Streisand 169)

Riding a bicycle is an intuitive activity. You merge with the machine and become one with it. The wheels become extensions of your legs, and the handlebars become a part of your upper body. You don't have to be conscious of the fact that you have to pedal in order to maintain balance. You don't have to make a conscious decision to turn the handlebars in order to change direction.

These thoughts seem to echo the mechanistic, hyper-masculine fantasies of the Futurists, whose visions of the rider as machine, and of the bicycle as part-human, are related to their apocalyptic fascination with cars (and car crashes), violence and war. Yet for Lea, the narrator, this sensation of forgetting the limits of one's corporeality in the oneness with the bicycle means something rather different—in the feeling of absolute control and self-determination, otherwise lacking in her life (even before her illness), cycling means happiness.

That the intuitive nature of cycling can allow for something close to a disembodied state in which aspects of the unconscious mind are potentially revealed, is central to two recent, unusual novels which place cycling at the heart of their narratives. Like Timm's novel they are sensitive both to the pleasure and pain of cycling and to the fragile psyche of the male riders they portray. Zelter's *Im Feld* (2018) and Zeh's *Neujahr* (2018) both employ the experience of a single bicycle ride as narrative frame. In neither text is the route either practical or orientated around a destination—both riders return, exhausted, to the point from which they started. Yet both novels present the circular journey, and in particular the slow, agonizing mountain ascent, as emotionally and psychologically charged, as transformative. In Zelter's *Im Feld* the narrator, Frank Staiger, who has recently moved to Freiburg im Breisgau, joins the local cycling club for what is supposed to be a relatively easy ride, only to find himself part of a tortuous, seemingly never-ending ride to the Vosges mountains over the border in France, in the company of a fanatical, eccentric ride leader.

Zelter's narrative is alive to the transformative intensity of the experience of cycling. The first hours of the ride, with the group working together effectively, are characterized by metaphors of effortless, flowing equilibrium, in which speed is experienced as "Ruhe und Rhythmus" (Zelter 25) 'calmness and rhythm.' The dividing lines between rider and bicycle, and even the social and gender categories of everyday life become pleasingly blurred:

Ein kurzer Wortwechsel mit einem grünblauen Rennrad. Es bestand aus dünnen Röhren und hatte eine klassische Schaltung. Die Schalthebel

befanden sich unten am Rahmen—und plötzlich merkte ich, ich spreche mit einer Frau. Es verschwimmen die Unterschiede.

Mann und Frau.

Jung und Alt.

Fahrrad und Mensch.

Es verschwimmen die Unterschiede. (Zelter 31)

A short exchange of words with a green-blue racing bike. It had thin tubes and classic gearing. The gear levers were located on the down tube—and suddenly I noticed I was speaking with a woman. The differences were blurring.

Man and woman.

Young and old.

Bicycle and human.

The differences were blurring.

This destabilizing of conventional binaries recalls Judith Butler's reading of the social construction of hegemonic identity through "stable bodily contours"; to challenge these boundaries is necessarily radical, with implications for "what it is to be a body at all" (Butler 205) and for identity. Here, we see this in the apparent collapse of the distinction between self and other. The language recalls the same experience of disembodied intuitive riding enjoyed by Streisand's narrator, in which the body seems to become an extension of the machine, or vice versa. Both texts seem indebted, more than to Futurism or modernist texts featuring bicycles such as Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's influential conception of the "psychology of happiness," which he popularized in his book *Flow* (1992). For Csikszentmihalyi, one of the most important paths to achieving what he terms "flow experiences," a state of "optimal experience" that equates to pleasure or happiness, is to take conscious control "of what the body can do" and "to impose order on physical sensations" (Csikszentmihalyi 94-5). He stresses that this is something that must be earned, by setting goals, practicing, and developing skills, but that it is within reach of everyone, not just serious athletes. He also notes that his research subjects reported that activities dependent upon "expensive equipment, or electricity, or other forms of energy measured in BTUs" resulted in significantly less (reported) happiness than "inexpensive leisure" (Csikszentmihalyi 99). Cycling may cost more than some pastimes, but as a form of self-propulsion has the potential to fall into the latter category, alongside walking, running and practical activities such as gardening or even knitting. The language employed in the above quotation from Zelter's novel, emphasizing rhythm and balance, closely corresponds to Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of the "flow" states generated by "rhythmic or harmonious movements" such as dance (Csikszentmihalyi 99). It is a sentiment echoed in numerous other accounts of cycling as a source of happiness, such as Robert Penn's account of "the pursuit of happiness on two wheels:" "if you have ever,

just once, sat on a bicycle with a singing heart and felt like an ordinary human touching the gods, then we share something fundamental” (Penn 16).

But just as the happiness offered by cycling is, in both *Der Mann auf dem Hochrad* and *Im Sommer wieder Fahrrad*, temporary, existing only in memory, or in hope for the future, the narrative arc of Zelter’s novel is characterized by irritation as much as “flow.” Zelter’s text, which has the telling subtitle “Roman einer Obsession” (‘A Novel of Obsession’), narrates a single painfully long day in the saddle and makes repeated metaphorical reference to the myth of Sisyphus. It exposes some of the absurdities of the obsessive, competitive culture of amateur cycling as the narrator endures a day he is wholly unprepared for, rather than admit weakness and drop out. The long ascents of steep mountain passes epitomize this masochistic attitude: “Es geht bei einem solchen nicht mehr darum, zu messen, wie schnell man da hochkommt, sondern wie lange man das durchhalten kann” (Zelter 44) ‘It’s no longer a matter of measuring how fast you can get to the top, but how long you can endure it.’ As the narrator observes later, reflecting the ostensibly irrational nature of the ride: “Jeder Anstieg ist gegen alle Logik” (Zelter 76) ‘Every climb goes against all logic.’ This applies most painfully to a detour that Landauer, the ride-leader, takes up one of the steepest roads in the region, and which turns out to be a dead end, tackled for its own sake and not part of a route.

Landauer becomes an almost demonic, mythical figure, representing an all-consuming, fanatical obsession in which cycling has in fact ceased to be a source of joy and become an end in itself: “Freude sei ein viel zu schwaches Wort. Besessenheit. Eine sich selbst speisende Besessenheit. Die sich von selbst antreibt” (Zelter 102) ‘Joy was much too weak a term. Obsession. An obsession feeding off itself. Which drives itself on.’ For the narrator, Landauer’s self-destructiveness mirrors aspects of his own personality, reflecting the fears he has for his relationship, career and life. As the agonizing day passes in a series of “Tiefpunkte, die eigentlich Höhepunkte waren” (Zelter 109) ‘Low points which were, actually, high points,’ the intensity of the experience is magnified by its evident pointlessness. It exists in absolute contrast with the ostensible rationale for cycling—health, fitness, leisure—and with the practical logic of everyday life, and yet the narrator finds himself unable to resist.

The novel presents a vision of the fragility of contemporary identities, and especially of masculinity, when confronted with the same loss of control that Streisand experiences in illness. With all trust between the exhausted riders broken down, the pace reduced, and the narrative fragmenting into a stream of consciousness focused on Frank’s domestic guilt, triggered by his failure to return home at the promised time, only the landscape itself offers certainty, honesty, and authenticity: “Ein Berg ist wenigstens noch ehrlich. . . . Man bekommt genau das zurück, was man einem Berg gibt. Und das ist menschenfreundlicher als alles andere, als der Rest der Welt” (Zelter 129) ‘At least a mountain is still honest. . . . You get back exactly what you give to a mountain. And that is more humane than the rest of the world.’ This transactional understanding of the natural world, and one’s place in it, echoes

the thoughts of commentators on slow travel such as Kagge and Kieran. The decreased speed of a mountain ascent plays a role here. Milan Kundera, in his novel *La Lenteur* (*Slowness*), observes that there is “a secret bond between slowness and memory”—the more you increase your speed, the easier it is to forget (quoted by Kagge 35). Glossing this, Kagge contends that the slower one travels, the more intense are the emotions experienced (Kagge 36-7).

These motifs, of decreasing pace, increasing intensity of emotion and memory, fragmenting identity, and the continuity and authenticity offered by landscape, find a powerful echo in Zeh’s *Neujahr*. As in her earlier novel *Nullzeit* (*Decompression*, 2012), Zeh sets it in a tourist destination, a category of space which, as Foucault suggests, is frequently experienced as a form of “heterotopia”, a “placeless place” (Foucault 1986 24) existing outside everyday networks and experiences.⁵ It is undoubtedly relevant that the protagonist, the German tourist Henning, is, like Zelter’s character Frank, both literally and symbolically an outsider, a stranger—even, it transpires, to himself. The novel opens with Henning attempting to ride an unsuitable rental bike up a mountain on Lanzarote on the morning of New Year’s Day. In the process, which encompasses almost the entire narrative, we follow Henning’s thoughts about his troubled family life and a sense of being incapable, especially as a father to two small children. In the second half of the novel, after he has reached the top of the climb, and following a series of unsettling moments of *déjà vu*, a sequence of suppressed memories of a childhood trauma experienced during a Lanzarote holiday on the very same mountain are triggered. Henning recalls how he and his younger sister Luna (although we are never quite certain how reliable the memories are) had been abandoned in their holiday villa, and had to fend for themselves in increasingly desperate circumstances for several days. This revelation retrospectively helps the reader to read Henning as a character, who struggles with crippling panic attacks and anxiety which he refers to simply as “ES” ‘IT,’ and has come to view his life, despite the outward trappings of success and happiness (family, career), as lacking and inauthentic: “Manchmal glaubt er, dass mit seinem Leben etwas nicht stimmt. Vielleicht existiert hinter der Welt eine zweite, in der die Dinge eine andere Bedeutung tragen” (Zeh 35) ‘Sometimes he thinks that there’s something wrong with his life. Maybe behind this world there’s a second one in which things have a different meaning.’

Only when he cycles from Playa Blanca up the mountain road to the village of Femés, on the Atalaya volcano, is he able to break through to this other, the real world; as he passes through a physical transformation on the bike, so he moves into this other realm, in which the apparent truth about his own past life is finally revealed to him. *Neujahr* punctuates the narrative with a detailed account, delivered via free indirect speech, of the subjective experience of cycling, and specifically of a challenging climb, which creates the state of emotional authenticity that is an essential precondition for the dramatic

⁵ *Nullzeit* is likewise set on Lanzarote, and the German protagonist is a scuba-diving instructor who has “fled” from a structured middle-class existence in Germany to the island.

childhood flashback that fills the second half of the novel. The account of the physical challenge, and the gradually increasing exhaustion of the slowing cyclist, offer parallels not only with *Im Feld* but a number of other autobiographical texts by extreme athletes such as mountain climbers. The text charts the passage, as Henning's mind fixates on his problems, from a state of pleasant flow to a condition comparable to the sense of disembodiment that is recounted in such texts, which Helga Peskoller has described as a reduction of the individual, in extreme circumstances, to what feels like unconscious or automatic movement (Peskoller 70-96; see also Hughes).

Henning initially feels "topfit": "Das Schöne am Radfahren ist, dass man nur treten muss. Mehr nicht. Es läuft gut. Langsam, aber gut" (Zeh 10) 'The great thing about cycling is that you only have to pedal. Nothing more. It's going well. Slowly, but well.' Later, much as in Zelter's narrative, the experience shifts from effortless pleasure to concentrated process: "Ein Tritt ein, zwei Tritte aus. Es ist wichtig, die Kraft einzuteilen, nicht aus der Puste oder ins Schwitzen zu kommen. Geschwindigkeit spielt keine Rolle, er hat sich nur vorgenommen, den Aufstieg zu schaffen, egal, in welcher Zeit" (Zeh 22) 'One stroke hard, two strokes easy. It's important to save your strength, not to get out of breath or to start sweating. Speed is not important. He has told himself simply that he's going to make it to the top, no matter how long it takes.' This focus, akin to Csikszentmihalyi's flow state, offers a sense of control to counterbalance the feelings of panic that plague him:

Das Radfahren tut gut. Als würde die Angst von seinem Bauch in die Beine geleitet und dort verbrannt. Hennings Herz schlägt normal. ES hat sich zurückgezogen, sich wieder schlafen gelegt. Am liebsten würde er für den Rest seines Lebens auf dem Fahrrad bleiben. (Zeh 40)

The cycling is good for him. As if the fear in his belly were being diverted to his legs and burned up. Henning's heart rate is normal. IT has retreated, has gone to sleep again. He would love to spend the rest of his life riding the bike.

The impossible desire that this state of control and perceived normality be permanent is of course telling, and when he reaches the steepest part of the climb, riding into a headwind with no water bottle, and at the limit of his abilities as a cyclist, he finds himself viewing his surroundings with a heightened sensitivity and from new perspectives, recalling Kagge's observations about the difference between a fast and slow approach to a mountain:

Hennings Gesicht ist jetzt direkt dem Asphalt zugekehrt. Er sieht die poröse Oberfläche des Straßenbelags. Kleine Steinchen, die vom Wind hangabwärts getrieben werden. Staubwirbel. Eine Ameise auf dem Weg zur anderen Seite. Einmal huscht eine Eidechse direkt vor seinem Vorderrad beiseite. (Zeh 53)

Henning is now directly facing the asphalt. He sees the porous surface of the road. Little stones which are being blown by the wind down the slope. Whirling dust. An ant on its way to the other side of the road. At one point a lizard rushes directly past his front wheel.

The physical crisis—in which he admits he is travelling slower than if he were walking—triggers a psychological one, in which rage at the wind, his bike, his job, his life and eventually also his own family and children, drives him forward. There is a telling parallel with Foucault's account of genealogy, the writing of history, as paradoxically requiring the destruction of the body; its "task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (Foucault 1977 148). Uncovering the past is a painful process. Thus Henning reaches the summit weakened and dehydrated, and receptive to impressions, both internal and external, that he would otherwise have been closed off to. He experiences a very literal version of Freud's "Wiederkehr des Verdrängten" 'return of the repressed,' as addressed in his 1919 essay on 'The Uncanny.' It is through a series of uncanny moments of recognition that childhood memories begin to half-surface, before they come flooding back to him when he is shown around the villa from his traumatic childhood holiday. In Zeh's text, more than in any of the other fictional treatments of cycling I have considered, the interplay between performative authenticity, achieved in the act of cycling (despite the technical and physical deficiencies), and emotional authenticity, achieved via the flood of memories, is made explicit.

We live in an era which Jean Baudrillard, famously, characterized as a *simulacrum*, in which "reality" is, for some, an image, a mediatized, virtual phenomenon; in which e-sports and indoor training are serious rivals to simple, outdoor pursuits; in which "fake news," bots and misinformation can steer public discourse. Each of these texts—even Timm's historical novel, published in the 1980s—reflects this in the depiction of the protagonists' desire, if not for a state of happiness, then for the experience of "real" feelings that are a proxy for happiness. Through the depiction of cycling as performance, they point to one way in which states of emotional authenticity, as a means of breaking the *simulacrum*, can be achieved, whether through the relative bliss of flow states, or the sense of disembodiment and reduction of self through physical suffering. These novels are, I would suggest, about cycling, and *because of this*, not despite it, they are also about modern life.

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