



Article

“Hopefully I Won’t Be Misunderstood.” Disability Rhetoric in Jürg Acklin’s *Vertrauen ist gut*

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Received: 15 June 2018; Accepted: 13 July 2018; Published: 17 July 2018



Abstract: This essay brings together the fields of German literature, disability studies, and rhetoric in an analysis of the rhetorical strategies and representational implications of disability in Jürg Acklin’s 2009 novel *Vertrauen ist gut*. Resting on the theory of complex embodiment, the analysis considers the rhetoric of *anmut* as a literary strategy that invites readers to share imperfect, yet profound, embodied rhetorical connections with the protagonist without rendering invisible the differences that shape embodied experience. Although the characters in *Vertrauen ist gut* are fictional, this novel provides important insights regarding experiences of precarious embodiment and affirms the value of interdependence while challenging ideals of autonomy and independence. Furthermore, the novel’s narrative within a narrative—and the consequences of the narrator’s interpretation of their significance—challenges readers to use caution when interpreting literary narratives, as their relationship to personal narratives may not always be straightforward.

Keywords: contemporary German literature; disability studies; representation; rhetoric

1. Introduction

This essay examines the disability rhetoric of *anmut* in Jürg Acklin’s novel *Vertrauen ist gut* (2009), which is already apparent in the protagonist’s opening lines: “Hoffentlich werde ich nicht falsch verstanden.” (*Hopefully I won’t be misunderstood.*) (Acklin 2009, p. 5) Indeed, this essay takes up the question of how the protagonist’s disability might be interpreted beyond the familiar disability myths that frequently appear in literary texts. Because the protagonist has cerebral palsy, a traditional approach to the analysis of this novel might focus on the metaphorical significance of the protagonist’s disability in relation to the novel’s thematic content and/or its function as a narrative technique. Such interpretations have been considered standard and abound in the Western tradition, as scholars of literary and cultural disability studies have demonstrated (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 4; Quayson 2007, p. 5; Dolmage 2014, p. 31). Within this paradigm, one might focus on the particularities of the protagonist’s disability, which involves a lack of muscle control (a physical disability) as well as a psychological component of fearfulness, which appears to be related to yet separate from his physical disability. Following this line of inquiry, one might conclude that the protagonist’s disability functions as a metaphor for his unreliability as a narrator and that his reflections on the relationship of a fictional narrative to his lived experience serve to destabilize the narrative in which he is embedded. Recent scholarship in disability theory pertaining to literary and cultural representations of disability has questioned this kind of approach because of the complex relationship between representations of bodies and living bodies (Siebers 2008, p. 65; 2013, p. 293) and challenged scholars to consider aspects that transcend representational concerns, for instance disability rhetorics (Dolmage 2014) and literary deployments of disability (Bérubé 2016).

These newer developments expand the scope of the concerns of traditional scholarship and mark a paradigm shift from analyses of the metaphoricity of disability toward modes of inquiry that explore

the ways in which embodied experiences shape texts (and vice versa), as well as how rhetorical strategies and deployments of disability in literary texts might create connections with readers of various embodiments. The current essay is positioned within this latter paradigm, employing tools from English-language disability studies in the analysis of a contemporary novel published in German in order to demonstrate that disability rhetorics are at work beyond the English-speaking realm. Like the texts in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, I will demonstrate that the narrator of *Vertrauen ist gut* “[...] wrestle[s] with the relationship between constructed and material identities” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 3). In the section below, I first provide an overview of the background and primary concerns of the theoretical underpinnings of my analysis. In the next section, I present the textual evidence that most compellingly illustrates the rhetorical strategies of the text that are grounded in disability. In the final section, I discuss the broader significance of my analysis within the theoretical landscape sketched in the opening section.

2. Disability Theory and Literary Texts

Three basic questions have been central to scholarly analyses of literary and cultural representations of disability: How is disability represented? Who has the right to represent it? And what are the ethical and political implications of its representation? The contributions to the fourth edition of the *Disability Studies Reader* illuminate a number of perspectives from which disability studies scholars approach the relationship between lived experiences of disability, representations of disability, and rhetorical deployments of disability in a variety of contexts. There is significant tension around the issue of representation because of the way it is entangled with the challenges and discrimination that persons with disabilities face in the physical world. Similar discussions are engaged in the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, the contributions to which show that disability can be simultaneously understood as a phenomenon that is experienced by individuals all over the world (Shakespeare 2012, p. 271), that is socially constructed (Barnes 2012, p. 12), and that is imagined and negotiated collectively through cultural artifacts (Bolt 2012, p. 287).

In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder highlight the particular tendency of disability to inaugurate an explanatory need (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 60). In the physical world, this is sometimes made explicit by personal questions asked by strangers, for instance “What happened to you?” or “What’s the matter with you?” (Poore 2007, p. 329), that put persons with disabilities under pressure to explain their difference. This explanatory need emerges from the compulsive normativity of the non-disabled imaginary, which has been shown to respond with adverse emotions when confronted with disability (Hughes 2012, p. 67). When it comes to portrayals of disability in literary texts, the explanatory need of disability surfaces and is explained in a variety of ways that are often connected to the discomfort produced by its presence (Quayson 2007). In the realm of photography, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson discusses disability as a “culturally fabricated narrative of the body” and a “system that produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies” (Garland-Thomson 2002, p. 74) and discusses four common visual rhetorics of disability: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the ordinary.

Over time, rhetorics such as these have contributed to the solidification of common myths and narratives that dwell in the collective imagination and are activated in encounters with disability. When it comes to the impact of representation on persons with disabilities, G. Thomas Couser critiques the way that “disabled people have been *hyper*-represented in mainstream culture; they have not been disregarded so much as they have been subjected to objectifying notice in the form of mediated starting” (Couser 2013, p. 456, emphasis in original). In light of the entrenched ways of perceiving and responding to disability, scholars have been particularly concerned with the question of whether there are ways of representing (and seeing) disability as something other than deviant embodiment. Proponents of disability life writing, such as Couser, view this practice “not as spontaneous “self-expression” but as a response—indeed a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture generally” (ibid., p. 457). Such developments are closely tied to new

theoretical approaches to disability, representation, and identity politics. For instance, while Lennard Davis announces “The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category” (Davis 2013, p. 263), Tobin Siebers argues for a “Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register” (Siebers 2013, p. 278).

Beyond the question of who has the right to represent disability is the question of whether it is possible to think about disability beyond the positive/negative binary. In *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, Tanja Titchkosky provides a rough sketch of the way forward, asserting that:

We perform the meaning of our embodied existence by the *way we narrate* the intersections of human diversity in the midst of which our bodies appear and in the ways that we ‘sell’ those stories to others. *Reading and Writing Disability Differently* requires relating to disability as it appears in powerfully paradoxical ways, and going on to regard this lived interpretive complexity as the prime space to rethink our culture in new ways (Titchkosky 2007, p. 6, emphasis in original).

Jay Dolmage takes up this very task in his 2014 monograph *Disability Rhetoric*, in which he expands upon the work of Mitchell and Snyder, Garland-Thomson, Quayson, and others to produce a comprehensive overview and analysis of disability myths that span multiple cultures and eras. In an interchapter entitled *An Archive and Anatomy of Disability Myths*, he discusses a number of familiar tropes and narratives that hinge on disability. For instance, physical disabilities have often been used in literary portrayals as an outward sign that a person is inwardly flawed or evil, such as in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (Dolmage 2014, p. 41). In cultural narratives, disability is frequently understood as something that is isolating and individuated (ibid., p. 43) or as something that can be explained as a sign from above (ibid., p. 44). This could be a negative sign, e.g., the idea that disability is a divine punishment, or it could be a positive sign, e.g., the notion that a person’s disability is a sign that they must be “gifted” with special skills or spiritual insights. From the perspective of disability studies theory, these myths have had a negative impact on the perception of persons with disabilities in the physical world because they perpetuate beliefs that disability implies the inferiority—or at least alterity—of persons with disabilities.

In the context of this discussion, the portrayal of disability in Jürg Acklin’s 2009 novel *Vertrauen ist gut* is interesting for its critical awareness of several disability myths. While it portrays a fictional character with a disability both convincingly and respectfully, it also deploys it as a rhetorical strategy to reflect on the themes of autonomy and interdependence without erasing the disabled body as a mere metaphor. Told from the perspective of a protagonist who has a disability, this novel is about the lived experience of disability as well as the role of storytelling in the negotiation of identity and the line between experience and representation. It accomplishes this by taking up the rhetoric of *anmut* that Dolmage defines in the second interchapter of his book, entitled *A Repertoire and Choreography of Disability Rhetorics*. Of *anmut*, Dolmage writes:

We have been told that Odysseus did not have a perfect body, but he had *anmut*, the ability to make his body signify in relation to the bodies in his audience and thus build his authorship. [...] *Anmut* offers a way to reconsider disability—not as something an audience will reject or stigmatize, but as something that a diverse audience is receptive to and accepting of (ibid., p. 138).

This term shares some semantic overlap with the German word *Anmut* in that it denotes grace and charm; however, it does not necessarily denote comeliness or beauty. Furthermore, Dolmage’s conception of *anmut* “holds that bodies are mutable, socially constructed” (ibid., p. 138). Referring to the speeches of Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox, Dolmage points out that “the supposed imperfection of these speakers could be easily seen as alienating the ‘able’ bodies of the audience, yet *anmut* names the space where rhetor and audience might share nonnormative and imperfect, though profound, embodied rhetorical connections” (ibid., p. 139).

Moving beyond the question of whether a representation of disability is good or bad, a focus on the rhetoric of *anmut* values the way in which disability is deployed to create nonnormative and imperfect, though profound, connections with those who read disability texts. This analysis of *Vertrauen ist gut* will show that its portrayal of disability acknowledges the impossibility of representing embodied experience with perfect accuracy (or rather, with predictable aesthetic effects) while simultaneously valuing the importance of representation and rhetoric as important means of communicating about and imagining embodied experience. This approach to representation takes the body seriously as a real phenomenon both in and beyond its textual life in a way that recalls Tobin Siebers' *Theory of Complex Embodiment*, according to which *realism* is:

[. . .] neither a positivistic claim about reality unmediated by social representations, nor a linguistic claim about reality unmediated by objects of representation, but a theory that describes reality as a mediation, no less real for being such, between representation and its social objects. Rather than viewing representation as a pale shadow of the world or the world as a shadow world of representation, my claim is that both sides push back in the construction of reality. [. . .] While identities are socially constructed, they are nevertheless meaningful and real precisely because they are complexly embodied. The complex embodiment apparent in disability is an especially strong example to contemplate because the disabled body compels one to give concrete form to the theory of social construction and to take its metaphors literally (Siebers 2013, p. 293).

Siebers' *Theory of Complex Embodiment* reminds disability activists and readers of literary texts alike that the written word both reflects and constructs the physical world, so that representation is necessarily a negotiation of reality. This will serve as the theoretical foundation for my analysis of the portrayal of disability in *Vertrauen ist gut*, and Dolmage's concept of *anmut* is the text's primary rhetorical strategy that acknowledges the complex relationship between reality and representation, between the reader and the protagonist.

3. Significantly Insignificant: A Literary Portrayal of Disability in a Realistic Mode

Jürg Acklin, a psychoanalyst based in Zürich, published *Vertrauen ist gut*, his sixth novel, and received a *Literarische Auszeichnung des Kantons Zürich* for it in 2009. The novel's title evokes a well-known adage: "Vertrauen ist gut . . . Kontrolle ist besser!" (*It's good to trust . . . but better to check!*) In other words, it is best to rely only on that which one has confirmed oneself. Felix, the protagonist and narrator of *Vertrauen ist gut*, is often unable to verify essential elements of his unfolding story even as he attempts to unravel fact from fiction. Almost fifty years old, he is a brother, brother-in-law, uncle, and a person living with cerebral palsy, which means that he has trouble controlling the movement of his legs and uses a wheelchair. He is presented as a likeable character who just happens to have a disability. Although this is a fictional text about disability, its portrayal is reminiscent of the visual rhetoric of "the ordinary" that Garland-Thomson discusses. Disability is presented as an important aspect of Felix's life, but also as just one aspect of his life. While it does not overshadow his other characteristics, it is an aspect of his identity that is constantly negotiated with other aspects, for instance in the context of family relationships.

Of his family's perception of him, he writes: "Sie finden alle: Felix muss man einfach mögen, er hat nichts von einem Behinderten, er ist in seiner Art einfach liebenswert. Ich weiß nicht, ob das stimmt, aber ich höre es natürlich gern." (*They all say: You just have to like Felix, he's nothing like a disabled person, he's simply loveable the way he is. I don't know if that's true, but of course I like to hear it.*) (Acklin 2009, p. 10).¹ This statement highlights the notion against which Felix must work to establish a sense of self-worth, namely, that people with disabilities are not lovable—so thank goodness

¹ All English translations from *Vertrauen ist gut* are my own.

“he’s nothing like a disabled person.” He lives semi-independently in an apartment attached to the home in which his brother, his brother’s wife, and their son live. Because of his struggle for a sense of self-worth within ableist discourse, it is important to Felix to appear as “normal” as possible, a point he reiterates throughout the novel. While he does not appear to work outside the home, he spends his days transcribing his brother’s handwritten manuscripts into typed texts: “Er hat mich gebeten, sein Rohmanuskript zu übertragen, weil ich mit seiner Handschrift vertraut bin und er meine sprachliche Genauigkeit schätzt.” (*He asked me to transcribe his raw manuscript because I am familiar with his handwriting and because he values my linguistic precision*) (ibid., p. 11) An optimistic interpretation would posit that Felix takes pride in using his skills to contribute to the family. On the other hand, this could also be indicative of an underlying assumption that one must “earn one’s keep” with one’s labor to be deserving of social worth—not to speak of the roof over one’s head.

Interpretations of the premise aside, the narrative of *Vertrauen ist gut* unfolds as Felix transcribes the manuscript for a new novel his brother is writing. As he types, the reader discovers this new story along with Felix while he simultaneously reflects upon his own story. He recounts memories from his childhood, reflects on his upbringing, mourns the loss of his parents, and agonizes over his relationships in the past and present. The appearance of the words in the physical book indicate the break between first-order narration (typed in Times New Roman) and second-order narration (typed in a *sans serif* font) as each story unfolds. Felix’s brother’s novel traces the story of a man named Paul Rosenberger, whose wife joins a cult—“Die Gläubigen des heiligen Lichts”—and threatens to divorce him if he does not join, too, and separate him from their young son, Willy. Rosenberger becomes increasingly desperate, and his actions unpredictable, as his attempts to reestablish familial harmony fail.

The trajectory of this fictional plot is highly disturbing to Felix. As he types the manuscript while attempting to construct his own story, he begins to see parallels to his experience in the fictional world. Not only does he recall memories of his mother’s declining physical health and his father’s struggles with mental health, he begins to seriously question his brother’s mental and emotional stability in the present moment because of the content of his new novel:

[...] nun droht plötzlich wieder das Unheimliche in mein Leben einzubrechen. Die Stimme meines Bruders ruft den Vater wach. Nicht nur die Stimme, es ist seine ganze Art, seine Haltung, sein Aussehen, seine Mimik. [...] Bis jetzt behielt ich das für mich, aber vor allem sein Manuskript macht mir große Sorgen. Natürlich weiß ich, dass die Kunst mit dem Leben nur begrenzt zu tun hat, aber lesen Sie selbst, und Sie werden verstehen. ([...] *suddenly, now the uncanny is again threatening to break into my life. The voice of my brother recalls Father. Not only the voice, it is his entire way of being, his posture, his appearance, his facial expressions.* [...] *I’ve kept it to myself until now, but his manuscript is especially worrying to me. Of course I know that art is related to life only in a limited way, but read for yourself, and you’ll understand.*) (ibid., p. 10)

The significance of this statement with regard to disability is threefold: First, it is one of Felix’s frequent assertions that he is not stupid—“Natürlich weiß ich, dass ... ” (*Of course I know that ...*)—, which are his way of responding to the myth of “disability drift” that Dolmage discusses, according to which physical disabilities are equated with mental disabilities (Dolmage 2014, p. 46). Second, they are indicative of his fear that his familiar, safe world will crumble and he will be left alone to fend for himself: “[...] nun droht plötzlich wieder das Unheimliche in mein Leben einzubrechen” ([...] *suddenly, now the uncanny is again threatening to break into my life.*) Finally, his statement that “[...] die Kunst [hat] mit dem Leben nur begrenzt zu tun” ([...] *art is related to life only in a limited way*), of which he is so certain at the beginning of the narrative, recalls the tension between Aristotelian mimesis and Oscar Wilde’s statement that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” in his essay “The Decay of Lying” (Wilde 1911). The negotiation of this tension lies at the heart of *Vertrauen ist gut*; as Felix attempts to unravel fact from fiction in his brother’s novel in order to assuage (or confirm) his

fears, his own unfolding story becomes increasingly difficult to interpret and shield from the fears that the novel fuels.

Felix is afraid that his brother will turn out to be just like his father, who had a violent temper and who eventually abandoned the family. Indeed, the novel opens with Felix's statement about why he is writing this story: "Ich schreibe aus Angst, es könnte sich wiederholen, was damals geschah, als unser Vater die Familie verliess und meine kleine Welt zerbrach." (*I'm writing because I'm afraid that the whole thing that happened back then will repeat itself, when our father left the family and my little world shattered.*) (Acklin 2009, p. 5) He briefly describes the incident that triggered this fear:

Am Samstag, kurz nach dem Mittagessen—ich saß vor dem Computer und tippte das Manuskript meines Bruders ab—, hörte ich plötzlich ein Brüllen, ich brauchte eine Weile, bis ich begriff: Mein Bruder schrie seine Frau an. Er war außer sich. Ich hörte das in meinem Bungalow neben ihrem Haus, einem Anbau mit großen Fenstern, hell und geräumig. Ich hörte ihn mit überschappende Stimme schreien und verstand jedes Wort. Für gewöhnlich höre ich durch den Verbindungsgang nur ein leises Murmeln oder beruhigende Alltagsgeräusche, ich fühle mich dadurch sicher und geborgen, allein in meinen vier Wänden, gehalten von einer warmen Geräuschkulisse. Dann ein wahnsinniger Schrei, ich zuckte zusammen, meine Beine schnellten nach vorn, meine Muskulatur gehorcht nicht immer. (*On Saturday, shortly after lunch—I was sitting at the computer and typing up my brother's manuscript—, suddenly I heard a roar, it took a while before I realized: my brother was screaming at his wife. He was beside himself. I heard this in my bungalow next to their house, an annex with large windows, bright and roomy. I heard him screaming, his voice cracking, and understood every word. Normally, I can only hear a quiet murmur or comforting everyday noises through the connecting corridor, I feel safe and secure, cradled by warm background noises. Then a mad scream, I winced, my legs sprang forward, my muscles aren't always obedient*) (ibid., p. 5).

This short passage is highly evocative of the life Felix leads and the world he inhabits: Close to his family, independent yet connected, and comforted by the muffled sounds of daily life that assure him he is not alone. His experience of disability is not of isolation (Dolmage 2014, p. 35) but rather a sense of equilibrium between autonomy and interdependence. That is why his brother's sudden and apparently atypical outburst threatens to destroy the stability Felix so needs in order to feel safe and in control of his life. His loss of motor control in this moment underscores its significance for the plot—without, however, negating the plausibility of his disability. While Felix claims to have heard every word his brother screamed at his wife, readers never learn what exactly he said. Important is, though, that the outburst is sufficient to trigger Felix's fear, and that fear is part of his self-conception: "Ich bin ängstlich, die Angst ist mein ständiger Begleiter." (*I am anxious, fear is my constant companion*) (Acklin 2009, p. 5).

As he writes his story, Felix searches the past and the present for signs that everything will be ok; for the same reason, he follows Rosenberger's story with great interest: "Es wird sicher alles wieder gut!" (*Everything will surely be alright again!*) (ibid., p. 80) Felix is happy to be part of a family, where he is connected with and can depend on others to assist him with daily tasks and who would be there to help in an emergency. However, he is convinced that his brother is showing signs of emotional instability and could suddenly leave him: "Und ich wäre auf einmal allein im Haus, allein auf der Welt" (*And all of a sudden I would be alone in the house, alone in the world*) (ibid., p. 91), isolated and helpless. Indeed, his greatest fear is having to assume sole responsibility for taking care of himself and everyday tasks, some of which are extremely difficult for him to complete alone: "[...] wenn ich die Verantwortung übernehmen müsste, dann erst recht [würde ich merken], dass ich behindert bin, und wenn ich mir selbst behindert vorkomme, würde den anderen Menschen noch viel mehr auffallen, dass ich behindert bin, und ich möchte normal sein, eben wie alle." ([...] *if I had to assume responsibility, then [I would notice] all the more that I'm disabled, and if I appear disabled to myself, then it would stand out so much more to other people that I'm disabled, and I would like to be normal, just like everyone*)

else) (ibid., p. 69). This desire to be normal, to fit in, to be accepted, is a key recurring element that, via the rhetoric of *anmut*, invites readers to share an imperfect, yet profound, embodied rhetorical connection with Felix. After all, who has not wished to be normal at some point in life? Felix's honesty and critical self-reflection invite the reader to similar reflection on one's own hopes and fears regarding one's position within normative discourses.

Felix's fear is of being disabled in a sense much broader than having cerebral palsy, which is an embodiment he can accept and even embrace. What he is afraid of is seeing himself as the disabled other who is helpless, abnormal, and abject, and he is afraid that others will see him that way, too, and reject him. Felix's negotiation of his subjectivity towards being (perceived as) normal pervades the novel. Indeed, he often reiterates that he is content with his life: "Manches ist schwierig, das ist wahr, aber ich bin nicht unglücklich, ich liebe mein Leben." (*Some things are difficult, that's true, but I'm not unhappy, I love my life*) (ibid., p. 52). In fact, it seems to be the people around him, especially his brother, who create tension around what he should (be able to) do with his body and his life: "Manchmal denke ich, dass [mein Bruder] meine Behinderung viel schlechter aushält als ich selbst, weil ich ja nie etwas anderes gekannt habe. Aber das ist nicht mein Problem. [. . .] Ich bin, wie ich bin, seit ich auf der Welt bin. Ich lebe gern, ich bin mit meiner Lage zufrieden." (*Sometimes I think my disability is harder for [my brother] to bear than it is for me, because I have never known anything else. But that isn't my problem [. . .] I've been the way I am since I've been in the world. I enjoy life, I am content with my situation*) (ibid., p. 17). In this way, Felix is portrayed as someone who is generally content with his life, despite his disability—or rather, because his disability is a normal part of his being in the world.

However, Felix's contentedness is constantly undermined by his anxiety. Most of all, he is worried about what people think of him: "Aber was denken die anderen Leute von mir? Wahrscheinlich werden sie mich für behindert halten, nur eben für total behindert. Im Grunde will ich mein ganzes Leben lang beweisen [. . .] dass ich eben kein Idiot bin." (*But what do other people think of me? They'll probably think I'm disabled, just totally disabled. Basically, my whole life I've been trying to prove [. . .] that I'm not an idiot*) (ibid., pp. 55–56). Felix's concern about others' perceptions of him is a deeply human experience, and, in this portrayal disability, it is also very humanizing, in that readers are not confronted with a disabled character who is unintelligible beyond his metaphorical significance or function as narrative prosthesis. Rather, readers are provided with a great deal of detail about Felix's inner world, his reflections on his experiences and the motives for his actions. While we of course remember that "literary characters are not real people" (Bérubé 2016, p. 27), the protagonist Felix brings us closer to understanding some of the physical, emotional and social experiences that someone with cerebral palsy might experience, even as his reflections on the significance of his brother's novel remind us that we should be cautious about interpretations of texts as having a one-to-one relationship with reality. Felix's anxiety, therefore, ties together his own life narrative with his brother's narrative, even as it encourages readers to embrace a certain anxiety in encounters with literary representations.

In Felix's narrative, his anxiety is most intense when he is outside the home, when he is away from familiar surroundings and routines, where he cannot easily predict the actions of others. For instance, while meeting with a blind woman with whom he is developing a friendship—and potentially a romantic relationship—Felix is distracted and intent on appearing normal: "Wenn wir miteinander reden, flechte ich immer wieder Fremdwörter ein, und die spreche ich besonders laut aus, damit die anderen Gäste des Cafés merken, dass wir beide nicht debil sind, dass es sich bei uns um zwei ganz normale, intelligente Menschen handelt." (*When we're talking with one another, I frequently weave in foreign words, and I pronounce these especially loudly so the others in the café notice that the two of us are not moronic, that we're simply two completely normal, intelligent people*) (ibid., p. 57). Because he uses a wheelchair and his love interest is blind, Felix does not want others to perceive the two of them as a disabled couple, that is, as a relationship based on the fact that both of them have a disability. Here, disability also functions on another level, namely as motive for the narrative itself, recalling Michael Bérubé's recent investigation of several ubiquitous literary deployments of intellectual disability (Bérubé 2016, p. 26). The fact that Felix's "love is blind" provides a nod to the complex metaphorical dimensions of

blindness (Rodas 2009, p. 116) in contrast to the physical condition of his companion, who is literally blind, which causes Felix to occasionally feel uneasy about their relationship.

Felix reflects on the origins of his anxiety and desire to be normal in the messages he received from family members over the years. When he was a child, his mother often said to him: “Bloß kein Mitleid heischen! Respekt sollen die anderen vor dir haben.” (*Never ask for pity! Other people should respect you.*) (Acklin 2009, p. 77). “[...] du musst schauen, dass du dich mit normalen Menschen umgibst.” ([...] *you have to make sure that you surround yourself with normal people*) (ibid., p. 76). While Felix’s brother wants him to be content just being himself—“Lass ihm seine Freiheit, damit er lernt, so zu sein, wie er ist.” (*Leave him his freedom so that he learns to be as he is.*) (ibid., p. 77)—he also wants him to have a normal life, that is, to be perceived as non-disabled as possible: “Zieh bitte die Beine an, wenn wir in ein Restaurant fahren! Setz dich bitte aufrecht hin! Du willst doch wohl nicht, dass die Leute glauben, du hättest auch noch einen Buckel!” (*Pull your legs in when we’re going to a restaurant! Please sit up straight! You don’t want people to believe that you have a hunchback, too!*) (ibid., p. 77).

In such moments of disability policing, which call for him to try to pass as able-bodied—or at least minimize the attention drawn to his disability—Felix’s worries and inner tension are not portrayed as resulting from his disability, but rather as a function of the interaction between perceptions of his disability and normative discourses on embodiment. Here again, *anmut* provides an opportunity for readers—whether disabled or non-disabled—to share a connection with Felix around the experience of having one’s appearance or behavior policed by others. Felix is torn between two narratives: one in which he is content and lives a fulfilled life, and another in which his disability becomes the defining element of his existence, overshadowing and invalidating all his other qualities. In the former narrative, his relationships are an integral part of his sense of contentment and belonging: he is part of a family that supports and encourages him, he contributes to the household by transcribing his brother’s manuscripts, he is a caregiver and role model for his young nephew, and he is experiencing the joy of a budding romance. In the latter narrative, however, his relationships are a liability: his brother could leave him all alone, disabled and helpless. Thus, as the novel explores the relationship between experience and representation, it also uncovers the struggle to communicate about the experience of disability beyond the positive/negative binary of self-narratives. In the paragraphs below, the discussion elaborates on the broader implications of the examples cited in the analysis above.

4. Taking Disability Seriously

In the context of Felix’s reflections on his experiences and relationships, disability is revealed as an unstable category; in other words, it is not something that some characters have and others do not, but rather it is an experience of body/mind that various characters have—or a category into which people are put—at different moments in the past and present. Felix’s brother, for instance, can be understood as a reminder that everyone is temporarily nondisabled. While Felix always perceived his older brother as both physically strong and mentally stable, the narrative reminds us that even he might one day develop a mental illness, like their father, or experience a debilitating decline in health and physical ability in old age, like their mother. Felix’s memories of his parents remind readers that they, too, will likely experience some loss of ability as they age and that every living body will, eventually, die. The able-bodied fantasy of eternal youth, ability and sanity does not hold sway over Felix and his family, because they have experienced and witnessed illness, disability, ageing and death.

Disability is thus difficult to locate in some of these literary bodies and not in others; for Felix’s brother, it appears as something on the horizon, while for Felix it has always been present. The category of disability as the abject other that Felix fears is partially disarmed through its portrayal as something that most people will experience at some point during their lives. On the other hand, especially in light of Felix’s inner conflicts, it can also be seen as an existential threat to the novel’s characters, as something lurking just around the corner and producing a sense of dread. What speaks for this latter interpretation is that, while Felix has cerebral palsy (which, as he says, causes him only occasional difficulties), it is his fear and doubt that disable him to a greater extent. Ultimately,

his fear is what leads him astray from the narrative of safety and contentment he enjoyed up until he began transcribing his brother's story of the emotional derailment of Paul Rosenberger. Felix's interrogation of the relationship between literature and life stems from his fear that his brother's new manuscript contains signs of an impending emotional breakdown. This is one of Felix's many unanswered questions: "Enthält sein Roman, frage ich, nicht vielleicht eine geheime Botschaft, nur für mich, um mich auf etwas vorzubereiten? Oder bilde ich mir das alles wieder bloß ein?" (*Does his novel not perhaps contain, I ask, a secret message, just for me, in order to prepare me for something?*) (Acklin 2009, p. 79).

His many questions certainly raise the issue of Felix being an unreliable narrator whose unreliability is linked to his disability. While this could certainly be seen as problematic in light of the long history of negative literary depictions of disability, a productive way of viewing Felix is that he is a self-critical narrator because he admits and reflects upon his own self-doubt and inability to know for sure. Seen in that light, his statements of "I'm not sure", "I don't remember," and "What could it all mean?" position the unreliable narrator as a positive figure who bravely confronts the uncertainties of life and the limits of one's ability to know by admitting they exist. What is unreliable—or rather, unpredictable—for Felix, as a fictional character with a disability, is his body. Felix describes the loss of control over his body that he experiences in moments of anxiety, which frequently result in muscle cramps and spasms. The bouts of anxiety that trigger this response are equally unpredictable. He is constantly concerned for the well-being of his family, and, at least since he began transcribing the Rosenberger novel, he frequently worries about the future: Will his brother abandon him and the family, as their father did? This pervasive, existential angst puts strain on Felix, both emotionally and physically. Felix's disability is thus significant in that it shapes his actions and responses in the novel, yet it is not overlaid with additional meaning; it primarily refers to itself, thus forcing readers to see disability and take it seriously as such.

His reflections on past and present experiences and relationships activate a number of additional disability myths. Regarding the myth of disability as pathology, readers are indeed presented with a "WebMD overview" (Dolmage 2014, p. 37) of the narrator's condition when, at the beginning of the novel, Felix reveals that he has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. The narrative does not, however, provide any kind of moral explanation or metaphorical significance of his disability that would serve to satisfy the broader explanatory need often inaugurated by disability (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 60). Felix simply has this disability and it is significant for his life and relationship to other characters in the literary world in a way that this particular disability might be significant for a person in the physical world.

This portrayal therefore manages to circumvent many of the mythical modes of representation one commonly finds in stories about disability and in stories that use disability to tell a story about something else. In *Vertrauen ist gut*, disability is neither a curse, nor a gift, nor a sign of evil, nor is it pitiful, wondrous, or a sign from above. The two myths it engages most are disability as pathology (in the sense that it can be diagnosed and described in medical terms) and the notion that disability is potentially isolating; however, as the examples in the analysis illustrate, these myths do not function one-dimensionally in the text or in their relationship to bodies outside the text.

While Felix describes some of the difficulties he experiences navigating everyday life, the narrative consistently refuses to provide any kind of deeper meaning or lesson to be learned from his disability. In many ways, this portrayal of disability could be described as realistic: the description of Felix's fictional life resembles descriptions one might find of an average person's everyday life in Switzerland in the early 21st century. He likes to listen to music, he might roll over to the table to eat a cookie or open the fridge to get some yoghurt, and he often writes emails to his girlfriend when he has trouble sleeping. In these realist-mode descriptions, readers might feel a connection with Felix because his everyday experiences resonate with those who have a similar disability as well as with those who do not.

In such moments, Felix's disability fades into the background and is overshadowed by the sheer normality of his everyday life. This representation approaches the literary version of the "ordinary" mode of visual representation discussed by Garland-Thomson. It achieves this effect via the rhetoric of *anmut*, where readers connect with Felix and may find resonance with some of his experiences, regardless of whether they have cerebral palsy or struggle with extreme anxiety. This is the kind of non-normative connection that *anmut* enables, demonstrating that, in a well-told story, narrators and characters are not solely intelligible to readers whose body/minds align with them. Indeed, beginning with a connection established on the spectrum of common experience, literary figures like Felix can open up new horizons for readers and offer insights beyond their own experiences of body/mind.

In light of this, it is significant that Felix's fear and uncertainty are triggered by the familiarity of the content of his brother's manuscript. "Im Text meines Bruders geht etwas vor, was mir *vertraut* ist. Der Vater des kleinen Willy, also mein Bruder, lebt in ständiger Angst, und irgendwann hält er das nicht länger aus." (*The father of young Willy, hence my brother, lives in constant fear, and one day he won't be able to stand it anymore*) (Acklin 2009, p. 157). My emphasis. Because of a certain degree of overlap in his brother's life and novel (for instance, he gave the protagonist his own name, Paul), Felix takes the entirety of the fictional narrative as an expression of his brother's true inner world. It seems that Felix might be misinterpreting the connection between literature and reality—in fact, he voices this concern himself—but it is impossible to know for certain, since the reader only has access to information about his brother's novel and domestic life via Felix's narrative. However, his own fear that his brother will abandon the family or become violent is real and continues to escalate until the end of the novel, where both narratives remain unresolved: the final pages of the manuscript describe Rosenberger taking his son Willy on a road trip that his estranged wife considers a kidnapping, and it is unclear what will become of them.

In Felix's own unfolding story, he has located and loaded his father's pistol. His increasing fear that his brother's novel is proof enough for him that his predictable world will soon crumble, this eventually pushes him to a complete reversal of attitude in the final paragraphs of the novel, where he expresses a desire for complete control and independence. "Eines Tages werde ich die volle Verantwortung für mein Leben übernehmen, lieber Bruder! "Endlich!" Wirst du begeistert rufen. "Er ist selbstständig geworden." (*One day I will assume complete responsibility for my life, dear brother! "Finally!" You will exclaim enthusiastically. "He has become independent."*) (ibid., p. 159). This desire for absolute autonomy is portrayed as a kind of madness and also as terribly isolating for Felix. While casting off his fear, ostensibly a positive development, he also indulges in a violent fantasy of sovereign power and tyranny:

Wenn mein Bruder wieder einmal droht, ich müsse ins Heim, dann werde ich ihn lächelnd auffordern, es doch zu versuchen. Falls es wirklich so weit kommt, und ich wäre gezwungen, mich zu wehren [. . .] vielleicht bewirkt der Schuss nur bleibende Schäden, mein Bruder würde behindert, und er wäre auf mich angewiesen—auf mich, seinen Bruder!" (*If my brother ever again threatens that I have to be institutionalized, then I'll laugh and dare him to just try it. In case it really goes that far, and I would be forced to defend myself [. . .] perhaps the shot would only cause permanent damage, my brother would become disabled, and he would be dependent on me—on me, his brother!*) (ibid., pp. 159–60).

With this statement, Felix himself appears to be fulfilling his own worst fears—that his brother will become mentally and emotionally unstable and abandon Felix. He fantasizes about violently resisting his brother's hypothetical attempt to institutionalize him, imagining himself going as far as shooting at his own brother, perhaps even killing or at least disabling him, so that it would then be his brother who would be dependent on him.

These final musings stand in sharp contrast to Felix's earlier contentment. A desire to be independent comes to overshadow his earlier wish to lead a normal life and care for his loved ones, as they care for him. This marks a drastic shift from an ideal of interconnectedness and mutual

support to one of individualistic independence in which mind conquers matter and one violently imposes one's will on others. Ironically, it was the fact that Felix took his brother's fictional account to be true that caused him to abandon the things that gave him a sense of security and question the relationships that gave his life meaning and stability. Felix's story line is left hanging when his brother wakes him in the middle of the night to ask: "Wo ist eigentlich meine Pistole? Du weißt schon: die alte Walther vom Vater?" ("Where is my pistol, actually? You know, father's old Walther model?") (ibid., p. 160). What will happen after these final lines is left to the reader's imagination.

Despite this abrupt shift at the end of the novel, Felix can be said to embody the disability rhetoric of *anmut* as discussed by Jay Dolmage. In contrast to characters such as Richard III, Felix's disability does not serve to characterize him as inwardly flawed or abnormal. Rather, his disability is presented in such a way as to make it seem of little consequence even as the protagonist describes how it shapes his physical and psychological experience of reality as well as his social interactions and relationships. This is noteworthy in a literary context, where metaphysical significance is usually heaped onto disabled characters, thus erasing the disability itself. This is also an important point of connection for readers, for, regardless of one's embodied experiences, one can connect with the disabled protagonist because he is written as a relatable character who speaks honestly of the complexity of his situation. For instance, Felix's description of himself as generally content, although some things in life are difficult, is a clear point of connection for most readers. Just like everyone else, he has ups and downs, strengths, shortcomings, hopes, fears, memories and relationships. He also has a disability, which involves an increased level of vulnerability and implies dependence on others. Importantly, his disability and vulnerability only serve to make Felix more likeable because they are not presented as something abject, abnormal or horrific, but rather simply a normal part of life. The fact that his disability can be understood through the lens of *anmut*, that is, valued for the rhetorical connections it enables with readers, in addition to a reading of it as narrative strategy makes this an especially strong literary portrayal of disability. The title's emphasis on *Vertrauen* (trust) and the absence of *Kontrolle* (control) in the novel seem to point to the answer Felix is looking for, or, indeed, the answer he has already found: Life is unfair, unpredictable and often inexplicable. While the experience of lack of control and the option to increase the value we place on trust is not limited to persons with disabilities, in this narrative it becomes especially salient because of Felix's disability. Where his disability is deployed as a rhetorical strategy, it is highly effective because its particularities draw attention to this mechanism. At the same time, it resists a one-dimensional reading by consistently insisting on the body and insisting that Felix's embodied experiences be taken seriously beyond metaphorical interpretation or narrative significance as motive, for instance (Bérubé 2016, p. 26). To borrow the words of Tobin Siebers: "Some bodies are excluded by dominant social ideologies—which means that these bodies display the workings of ideology and expose it to critique and the demand for political change" (Siebers 2013, p. 295). Felix's disabled bodymind (Price 2015), while a real aspect of the literary world he inhabits, also interrogates the relationship between experience and representation via his own life narrative and in the fictional narrative he is transcribing. Along with readers, Felix wonders about his story and how it is connected to the events unfolding in his brother's novel.

It is against this backdrop that *Vertrauen ist gut* poses questions about the relationship between lived experience and representation that connect well with Tobin Siebers' theory of complex embodiment. To reiterate, Siebers' theory "[...] describes reality as a mediation, no less real for being such, between representation and its social objects., [...] both sides push back in the construction of reality" (ibid., p. 293). The novel draws explicit attention to this whenever Felix wonders about the truth of the content of his brother's novel: "Das soll Fiktion sein? Das kann doch nicht einfach ein Roman sein. Ist das nicht wie aus dem Leben gegriffen? [...] so etwas kann man doch nur schildern, wenn man etwas Ähnliches erlebt hat, oder?" (That's supposed to be fiction? But that can't just simply be a novel. Isn't that like taken from real life? [...] you can only portray something like that if you've experienced something similar, right?) (Acklin 2009, p. 49).

The uncertainty of his tone, especially in the formulation of these statements as questions, is the hanging question that remains unanswered at the end of the novel. The ideology exposed by Felix's questioning appears to be directed at the conflation of literary narratives and personal narratives. If we assume that authors write what they know, does that mean that everything an author writes must be grounded in their lived experience? Do stories have to be "based on a true story" in order to tell us something true? Does art always imitate life, or does life rather imitate art? While personal narratives are essential for the establishment of stable subjectivities, interpersonal relationships, and political rights, *Vertrauen ist gut* seems to imply that we can also do harm when we misinterpret literary narratives as personal narratives.

5. Textual Bodies, Embodied Experiences

As we seek new insights into the ways that disability is meaningful in cultural artifacts, *Vertrauen ist gut* reminds us that it is essential to consider both genre and cultural context before jumping to conclusions. *Vertrauen ist gut* displays the workings of an ideology of normality and independence, pointing to the ways in which representation both draws upon and shapes common cultural understandings and narratives, particularly when it comes to disability. To achieve that end, it does not matter whether the author is disabled or not. What is important is that the text does rhetorical work that invites readers, via the rhetoric of *anmut*, to share non-normative and imperfect, though profound, embodied rhetorical connections with Felix without rendering invisible the differences that shape his embodied experience.

Although the characters in both story lines of *Vertrauen ist gut* are fictional, this novel tells us something true about the experience of precarious embodiment, the value of interdependence, the unreliability of memory, and the lack of control one ultimately has over the behavior of others. It undermines the ideal of the rational subject who is master of its own mind, body and destiny, and it challenges the idea that it is desirable to be fully independent from others. These are important points of consideration for both disabled and (temporarily) non-disabled readers. In this way, the novel echoes Rod Michalko's observation that "disability is *precisely* the turbulence . . . so necessary to those who understand and experience the world as a taken-for-granted, unified reality" (Michalko 2002, p. 182) Through the experiences and reflections of Felix, readers are confronted with turbulence that upturns assumptions about the otherness of disabled experience and forces an examination of the negative social consequences of narratives of control and independence.

The theory of complex embodiment enables us to value disability texts such as *Vertrauen ist gut* for the productive rhetorical work they do, particularly when they challenge familiar narratives about disability. The portrayal of disability in *Vertrauen ist gut* and its deployment of the rhetoric of *anmut* accomplishes a nuanced negotiation of the themes of autonomy and dependence in human relationships that are complicated by the presence of disability. While the protagonist's agonized reflections on the relationship between the first- and second-order narration could be attributed to his cerebral palsy or his bouts of fear, this essay has contended that it is rather a negotiation of the relationship between literary narratives and lived narratives that is most central to *Vertrauen ist gut*. Following this line of interpretation, Felix's disability is a physical reality in the literary world that shapes his experiences and has an impact on his relationships, much as it would in the physical world, and this portrayal may align with or deviate from the experiences of bodies beyond the novel. Because it places central emphasis on questions of the authenticity of narratives, this is significant for a consideration of the relationship between representations of bodies and embodied experience. Where Felix's experiences align with readers (of various embodiments), the text has the potential to create connections at the level of identification, perhaps providing a sense of validation for similar experiences one has had. Where they deviate, readers might be challenged to think beyond the boundaries of their own experiences to consider the embodied experiences others have had that differ from their own. In both cases, the presence of a novel within a novel reminds readers of the fine line between reality and fiction that simultaneously represents and constructs embodied experience in the act of storytelling.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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