Reading ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ in wartime literature

Background notes

1) Novels considered in the discussion (NOT expected to have been read, but noted here in case you want to read them later)

Rose Macaulay, *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916)
Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (1919)

2) Literary examples

*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*
Friday 18 February 1921: ‘there are very few wounded soldiers abroad in blue, though stiff legs, single legs, sticks shod in rubber and empty sleeves are common enough. Also at Waterloo I see dreadful-looking spiders propelling themselves along the platform – men all body – legs trimmed off close to the body. There are few soldiers about.’

‘They’
By Siegfried Sassoon (1917)

The Bishop tells us: ‘When the boys come back
‘They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
‘In a just cause: they lead the last attack
‘On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
‘New right to breed an honourable race,
‘They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.’

‘We’re none of us the same!’ the boys reply.
‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
‘Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
‘And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
‘A chap who’s served who hasn’t found some change.’
And the Bishop said: ‘The ways of God are strange!’

1
‘Disabled’
by Wilfred Owen (1920)

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, –
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands.
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a blood- smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he’d drunk a peg,
He thought he’d better join. – He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.

Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,)
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
*Thanked* him; and then enquired about his soul.
Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

3) Extracts from texts on disability theory


6: ‘Constructed as the embodiment of a corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control and identity.’

9: ‘Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance. Indeed, main characters almost never have physical disabilities [...] when literary critics look at disabled characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically, reading them without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentimental, romantic, Gothic or grotesque traditions.’

Lennard J Davis, ‘Crips strike back. The rise of disability studies’, *American Literary History* 11:3 (Autumn 1999), 500-512

510: ‘Protagonists are almost always defined as having normal bodies, the default setting of physicality in novels. When characters have disabilities, the novel is usually exclusively about those qualities. Yet the disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself. Rather, the disabled character is placed in the narrative “for” the nondisabled characters – to help them develop sympathy, empathy, or as a counterbalance to some issue in the life of the “normal” character. [...] Beautiful (and noble, gentle or bourgeois) characters should be morally virtuous; crippled or deformed people are either worthy of pity or are villains motivated by bitterness or envy.’


2: ‘disabilities and disfigurements become a particularly significant marker for an individual’s or group’s social identity and self-understanding. Especially traumatic, visible injuries have tended to be the primary way in which the general population of disabled veterans often seems to be conceived in the minds of experts, artists, and the general citizenry’
6 ‘as a disabled man, then, the veteran comes to be seen increasingly not as a warrior, but through the images by which people with disabilities have been conceived [...] culture has endowed disability with a broad range of symbolic meanings’

7: ‘Pity (and self-pity too) result from the perception that people with disabilities are innocent sufferers: in the case of veterans conscripted into armies, men injured through no fault of their own, and thus made to experience pain, a loss of autonomy, and exile from the community of the able-bodied’


296: ‘In Britain, broad public participation in the resolution of disabled ex-servicemen’s problems – through voluntary organisations and charities – led veterans to believe that their fellow citizens had honoured their sacrifices. Voluntarism brought about a reconciliation between the war’s most visible victims and those for whom they had suffered.’

Deborah Cohen, The War Come Home. Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 143-4: ‘The British disabled measured their manhood by fortitude in the face of adversity. The most manly veteran was the one who suffered without complaint’

147: ‘Reporters who expected the worst could have found it. However, stories of depression and bitterness found no place in narratives of cheerfulness.’

Michael Bérubé, ‘Disability and narrative’, PMLA, 120:2 (March 2005), 568-576

569: ‘A good deal of disability studies work in literature thus far has concentrated on the depiction of individual characters in narratives. This strand of disability studies has tended to focus on the representation of human bodies and to insist that Western literature of the past two millennia has often participated in the Christian tradition of reading disability as an index of morality or, alternatively, as a sign of God’s grace or of his wrath [...] disabilities [might not be] presented as indexes of their moral standing but they [might] serve nonetheless as indexes of everyone’s else’s moral standing’

570: ‘Literary representations of people with disabilities often serve to mobilize pity or horror in a moral drama that has nothing to do with the actual experience of disability. [...] I am thinking partly of Irving Zola’s famous line that never once, in the course of reading hundreds of novels about detectives with disabilities, did he come across a wheelchair user who said, “God dammit, how I hate stairs”.’


32: ‘Disability-informed criticism as a methodology requires the researcher to focus on the fictional disabled subject, their interrelations within the narrative and the context of
disability in the fictional world. From this vantage point the structure of the text, its cultural significance, and the meaning of disability to the culture in which the narrative is produced and consumed, are the pivotal interests of the analysis’

Ria Cheyne, “‘She was born a thing’: Disability, the Cyborg and the Posthuman in Anne McCaffrey’s The Ship Who Sang”, Journal of Modern Literature 36:3, 2013, 138-156

147: ‘the overall tone of the narrative is relentlessly optimistic [...] This mood is crucial to discouraging a critical engagement with disability, for with such a positive outcome, the end must surely justify the means’