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## A “Phrase Too Cute to Do Our Ugliness Justice” Portraying “Wounded Warriors” in Contemporary War Fiction

**T**he only physically disabled character in Ben Fountain’s excellent Iraq War novel *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012) is not a combat veteran but the protagonist Billy Lynn’s father Ray, who is confined to a wheelchair following a stroke. Though the brooding, remote Billy Lynn and his squadmates are mentally rattled by the sequence of events beginning with the death of two of their own in battle and now culminating in a garish “Victory Tour” that has brought them to Texas Stadium to be feted at a Dallas Cowboys game, at least they have their physical health to be thankful for. On the other hand, Ray Lynn, portrayed in a subplot involving Billy’s dysfunctional family, does little to inspire sympathetic understanding of the impaired. Confined to a battery-powered wheelchair, a “dark purple motorized job with fat whitewalls and an American flag decal stuck to the back” (74) and unable to speak clearly, Ray inspires comments such as the following from his daughter Kathryn: “He’s an asshole.... Won’t do his physical therapy, never goes out, just sits in that damn chair all day watching Fox and listening to fat-ass Rush Limbaugh, won’t even talk unless he wants something, and then he just grunts. Expects us to wait on him hand and foot” (75). Billy Lynn the war hero, whatever the source of his alienation, is nonetheless physically whole, sexually attractive to women, and envied by the fat-cat Dallas Cowboys owner and the hyper-masculine Dallas Cowboys players he meets in the course of the novel. Ray Lynn’s disability, on the other hand, symbolically complements and intensifies the lameness of his arch-conservative political views, the blindness of

his hypocritical morals, and the impotence of his control over his family, his life, and the world.

“Lameness,” “blindness,” “impotence.” Theorists of disability would say that my use of these words to describe Ray Lynn indicates how infested is our language with figures of speech that stigmatize the handicapped. But what if lame, blind, and mutilated veterans are not even stigmatized, but just ignored? So far, our most popular and acclaimed works of fiction about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have mostly done just that. The United States’ post-9/11 wars have focused attention on the plight of combat veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), emotional and mental maladies that have rendered many veterans too damaged to effectively and happily reintegrate socially and in the workplace after deployment. Imaginative literature about the war reflects and helps shape the national absorption with the subject; works such as Phil Klay’s *Redeployment*, Roxana Robinson’s *Sparta*, and Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, along with *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, are set largely back in the States after a traumatizing deployment that has rendered their protagonists struggling to reconnect with a society that is mystified by the internal conflicts that seem to afflict so many veterans.

While I salute all efforts to provide health and services to veterans suffering from PTSD and TBI, I’m curious about the relatively little consideration paid to another kind of wounded veteran: the permanently physically disabled victim of combat injuries. In neither our national consciousness nor our national literature have we paid nearly as much attention to maimed veterans, be they amputees, badly burned or disfigured, or blinded. The discrepancy is interesting, one, because in past post-war periods, it has been the physically disabled veteran who has most compellingly represented the war’s lingering costs, and, two, physically disabled veterans are among us in numbers and deserve focused national attention to ensure the services we provide them are generous and effective. It is beyond the scope of this essay to delineate the issues and make recommendations about policies and programs for post-9/11 disabled veterans, but a survey of the literature that portrays severely injured soldiers as they try to get on with their lives clarifies issues at stake, opens possibilities for new ideas, and takes seriously the concerns of the few authors who have seen poignant potential in crafting stories featuring disabled veterans.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Rebecca Ruiz reports in a February 6, 2013 online *Atlantic* magazine article that, “Of the more than 50,000 service members wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan who are considered polytrauma patients, 1,600 have moderate to severe brain injuries, 1,400 are amputees, and 900 were severely burned.” Duncan Wallace, in the April 2012 Australian scholarly publication *Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health* writes, “By theatre of operations to

Portraits of badly-wounded and disabled veterans in post-9/11 narratives are, in my survey, few. One of the first such representations came in Siobhan Fallon's short story "The Last Stand" from her 2011 collection *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. We can also examine Iraq veteran Brian Van Reet's short story "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek," published in 2012 in the anthology *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* and several stories in Katey Schultz's 2013 collection of short stories *Flashes of War*. The most extended portrait, interestingly enough, comes via *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling's *The Cuckoo's Calling*, published in 2013 under the nom-de-plume of Robert Galbraith. To make sense of what these stories are trying to tell us, several critical approaches aid apprehension of patterns and sources of tension. An historical comparison with representative examples from other wars establishes continuities, rupture points, and new developments. We can also take note of visual representations of war-related disability in photography and film and the critical commentaries on the same; examples of both are more numerous than narrative representatives of combat disability and critical writing on the same. Finally, we can draw on the theories and practical examples offered by disability studies, a burgeoning scholarly field that has much to offer in regard to both literary study and the real-world business of recognizing the rights and needs of the physically impaired. Canvassing the ideas and implications of the historical, visual, and critical record establishes a framework for a more focused and generative examination of Fallon's, Schultz's, Van Reet's, and Rowling's stories.<sup>2</sup>

However rare they may be today, contemporary portraits of permanently wounded veterans are deeply rooted in the Western literary tradition. Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, for example, first performed in 409 B.C., features a character disabled by a mysterious foot wound and abandoned by the Greek army in its quest to conquer Troy. The play has attracted attention in recent years for its portrait of Philoctetes' anguish and outsider status, as well as the strained efforts of healthy,

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September 2010, 1,158 US military personnel suffered major or partial limb amputations as a result of the conflict in Iraq, 249 in Afghanistan, and 214 in 'unaffiliated conflicts'<sup>34</sup> in Yemen, Pakistan and Uzbekistan." Wallace also states, "Between April 2006 and December 2011, at least 20 British military personnel suffered traumatic limb amputations in Iraq, and 237 in Afghanistan." In an online *Soldiers* magazine article dated March 8, 2014, Elizabeth M. Collins writes, "[T]he Department of Veterans Affairs provided inpatient treatment to 180 severely disabled blind Iraq and Afghanistan service members and veterans as of July 2013."

2 Too late for inclusion in this study, I discovered Annie Proulx's 2008 short story "Tits-Up in a Ditch", which features a young woman veteran who loses an arm in Iraq while serving in the U.S. Army.

whole, normative characters to understand him.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's canon is full of enraged warriors whose martial spirit sits uneasily within peacetime society—*Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Othello*, and *Richard III* head the list, but the most specific reference to physically wounded veterans comes in *Henry V*, where the English king Henry's famous Agincourt speech asserts that scars earned in battle with the French will make anyone who fought the envy or those who did not:

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars  
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's Day...." (4.3.47-48)

And gentlemen in England now abed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day. (4.3.64-67)

The ploy works within the play to motivate the English army to victory, while establishing one pole in a field of representational possibilities: the wound as badge of honor. But a scar is not a disability; much like "the red badge of courage" in Stephen Crane's novel of the same name and the "million dollar wound" that allowed soldiers in Vietnam to be evacuated before the end of their tour without suffering the lifelong debilitating effects of amputation, disfigurement, or blindness, the non-disabling wound functions positively in the life of veterans and society as a sign of sacrifice, service, and hard-earned authority.

The permanently disabled veteran, however, rarely is accorded such unequivocal respect. Instead his (and now, sometimes, her) damaged body troubles the national imaginary just as it impedes upon day-to-day life and fills the wounded veteran with doubt, shame, and regret. Historians and literary critics have identified the Napoleonic Wars as a site of crucial epochal change in the artistic and cultural representation of disabled veterans within the Anglo-American tradition. Scott Krawczyk, for example, has studied the many pictorial, poetic, and narrative representations of such disabled veterans in the British popular press in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. He concludes that portraits of disabled veterans in popular culture during the era generated attitudes that would become dominant in the decades and centuries following. One, disabled veterans often served as objects of pity who focalized hatred of war and national military ambition while also catalyzing outcry for humane post-war governmental and

<sup>3</sup> The contemporary theater troupe Acts of War stages *Philoctetes* and another Sophocles play, *Ajax*, that in performance feature veterans in leading roles.

medical care systems, or, two, their physical blight matched an equal interior malignity that takes shape as self-hatred and anti-social or evil behavior. In either case, Krawczyk suggests that during the period the permanently injured veteran emerged as a symbolically potent figure, attractive both to authors and artists and political and cultural stewards who saw in disabled bodies enormous potential for manipulation.<sup>4</sup> In America, narrative portraits of the disabled veteran flourished during and after the Civil War. Alice Fahs, in *The Imagined Civil War*, has studied the popular literature of this type and found that the impaired veteran was treated neither as a monster nor a pawn in a national debate about medical services. Instead, the disabled veteran was generally portrayed as a sacrificial lamb in a melodramatic social sorting out of gender roles about what was acceptable and normal. A representative story examined by Fahs is “A Leaf from a Summer” published in *Harper’s Weekly* in November 1862. Fahs writes:

In that story a soldier faced an amputation hopefully because he had a letter from his beloved “next to his heart”; afterward, contrary to the surgeon’s expectations, he indeed “began to rally.” But after receiving a letter telling him that his shallow lover had changed her mind and would not “marry a cripple,” the hour quickly came “when they lowered him into the earth, and fired their volleys over him.” As the narrator commented, “his enemy had struck him unarmed and unaware.” As such the popular fiction revealed, the war only intensified a long-standing literary connection between love and war: numerous stories claimed not only that women’s love was vital to a successful war but that love itself equaled war in its power to kill men. (131)

The major wars of the twentieth century continued to generate striking examples of disability that both reflected nineteenth-century trends and wrought transformations on them. British World War I poet Wilfred Owen’s poem “Disabled” grimly depicts a disabled veteran as a forlorn object of pity who so troubles the peacetime citizenry that they hide him away in the name of care:

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<sup>4</sup> Krawczyk writes, “The body of the broken soldier during this period is an important signifier of the public confrontation that occurred during transition from the social conventions and customs that governed life in ‘Old England’ to the age of regulation and administration associated with the modern liberal state.... One might even say that intervention of the state eventually transformed the body of the broken soldier into a form of public property” (101-102).

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,  
And shivered in his ghastly suit of gray,  
Legless, sewn short at elbow....

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...

American author Dalton Trumbo's 1938 novel *Johnny Got His Gun* intensified Owen's grim characterization by depicting protagonist Joe Bonham as a World War I casualty who awakens in a hospital bed to realize that he lost his arms, legs, and face, while retaining full mental awareness of his condition. Post World War II, the seminal representation of disability was Walter Winchell's 1946 movie *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Regularly accorded spots high on lists of Hollywood's greatest films, *The Best Years of Our Lives* recounts the travails of Homer Parrish, who has lost both arms in the war, as he attempts to find love and purpose upon his return home. Homer is played by Harold Russell, an actor who like the character he plays lost both arms in the war, and the film does not spare flinch-inducing depictions of Russell's mechanical hook prostheses, such as a scene in which Homer taps out a tune on a piano. It ends on a grudgingly hopeful note, however, with Homer's wedding, but even then Homer's bride Wilma's love seems overshadowed by a steely determination to share her life with a badly mutilated, socially troubling husband. Curiously, after *The Best Years of Our Lives*, World War II's disabled veterans, who numbered in the hundreds of thousands, seem not to have caught the eye of the nation's authors and filmmakers, for further depictions in fiction and film are few. Post-Vietnam, however, the wheelchair-bound veteran became something of a recurring presence in Hollywood films. Featured prominently in movies such as *Coming Home* (1978), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Forest Gump* (1994) such figures are portrayed sympathetically and even heroically.<sup>5</sup> Their physical wounds tend to enhance, not diminish, other aspects of their personality by serving as conduits to wisdom and an increased emotional and communicative sensitivity. In *Coming Home*, for example, the disabled veteran played by Jon Voigt is an extremely desirable object of adoration of Jane Fonda's female lead and, despite his wounds, a superbly proficient sexual partner. This heroizing of the disabled veteran served

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<sup>5</sup> *Born on the Fourth of July* was based on the memoir of the same name written by Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic and published in 1976. *Forest Gump* was based on a novel of the same name by Winston Groom, published in 1978. The script for *Coming Home* was crafted by a team of Hollywood screenwriters.

the post-Vietnam film canon's political aims, which almost de facto represented the war as unjustly inflicting carnage not just on the Vietnamese, but the American draftees who fought it against their will, with further social and political afflictions reverberating politically and socially on the homefront. The political deployment of disabled veteran characters in post-Vietnam movies supplemented the characters' cultural charge, which flew in the face of prevailing beliefs about what constitutes a normative and healthy body.

We still await Hollywood portraits of disabled Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, but widely-circulated photographs of contemporary disabled veterans taken early in the war suggest that representations of disability, if not exerting pressure politically and culturally with the confidence of movies such as *Coming Home*, still trouble and generate questions. The three photographs below inspire contemplation not just of their subjects' wounds and their ability to deal with them, but of the photographer's possible intentions and the viewer's possible responses.



Gerald Herbert/AP, "Staff Sergeant Christian Bagge Jogging with President Bush" (2006)



Nina Berman, "Dawn Halfaker" (2006)



Nina Berman, "Marine Wedding" (2006)

These pictures and others like them have prompted intense critical debate about the ethics and aesthetics of images of war's horror, to include but not limited to portraits of grotesquely distorted bodies and faces. The punch-and-counterpunch of heavyweight thinkers such as Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Elaine Scary, Rosemarie Garland Thompson, Jacques Rancière, and Ariella Azoulay cannot be related here in detail, but the questions they ask provide an entree into the aesthetic and moral questions at the fore of narrative representations of disabled veterans.<sup>6</sup> How can a photograph be an artwork at the same time it makes a political statement? What is the right moral stance of the photographer in the face of a disabled subject? The viewer's? What is the backstory and context of the photograph, and to what extent are we allowed to consider them? Are the subjects being taken advantage of, or objectified? Who published them and why? Who republished them? How are such images understood by viewers in the aggregate and the particular? What is the proper response to such a photograph—anger, pity, action, contemplation, resolve, or something else?

This train of theory about visual representations of war-related disability has its counterpart in the emerging literary field of disability studies. Important works by Lennard Davis, the husband-and-wife team of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, and Tobin Siebers explain how disability has been used so often as an aspect of characterization in fiction that it is easy to overlook. In his survey of pre-twentieth-century literature such as Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Davis suggests the literary record equates physical disability with inner anger and anti-social behavior, and asserts that authors rarely show either the ability or inclination to critique or surpass long-standing modes and methods of characterization. Davis is skeptical of fiction's ability to portray disability in ways that don't reinforce nefarious norms:

The novel form, that proliferator of ideology, is intricately connected with concepts of the norm. From the typicality of the central character, to the

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6 Significant entries in what has been termed the "New Aesthetic" debate include Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977/2001) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Elaine Scary's *On Beauty and Being Just* (2001), Rosemarie Garland-Thomas's *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2012), Dora Apel's *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (2012) and Ariella Azoulay's *Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* (2003), *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2012), and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012).

normalizing coda of endings, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel promulgates and disburses notions of normalcy and by extension makes of physical differences ideological differences. Characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning, as are moments of disease or accident that transform such characters. One of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal. (17)

Other critics, however, have made a virtue out of what Davis terms vices. Mitchell and Snyder suggest that disability appears so often in the literature of England and America because it dramatizes a powerful conflict within the Anglo-American psyche about what is normal and how difference is understood and contained psychologically and socially. They claim that disabled protagonists exemplary represent a basic novelistic structuring device that has a beleaguered hero in contest with an oppressive world. Siebers suggests a way that disability offers an escape from the iron cage of ideology Davis describes: “Some bodies are excluded by dominant social ideologies—which means that these bodies display the working workings of ideology and expose it to critique and the demand for political change” (33). Siebers points to twentieth-century texts such as *Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which protagonists such as Holden Caulfield and Scout Finch’s attitudes toward physically disabled minor characters serves as a critical marker of their humanity and moral rightness.

We might now apply these insights to the stories featuring wounded Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. The plot of Siobhan Fallon’s “The Last Stand” replicates Alice Fah’s Civil War example by portraying a badly-wounded veteran, Kit, in the process of being dumped by his young wife Helena. Kit, his leg horribly mangled in Iraq and now encased in an elaborate splint and destined for amputation, proves just too much to deal with for Helena. “I wish I was a better wife,” Fallon has Helena state. “She stopped and looked at his foot, her eyes translucent with tears. ‘I just want to go home and start all over again.’ Then, so quietly he almost didn’t hear her, ‘Alone’” (145). No one would accuse Fallon of the literary naiveté and social callousness of the unnamed Civil War author—Helena is so touchingly described that one’s heart breaks almost as much for her as for Kit—but “The Last Stand” shows the persistence of a dominant trend in the representation of disability that portrays it as disqualifying one from being an adequate spouse or romantic partner. Kit’s wound is physical, but also more than physical; the changes it wreaks permeate

every facet of his post-war life, especially so by placing unbearable demands on those most close to him to render love, support, patience, and care.

Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War* features several stories that portray both veterans and Iraqis and Afghans with amputated limbs. Two tales, "Amputee" and "Permanent Wave," function as a diptych portraying the perspectives of female and male American veterans, respectively, who have lost arms in Iraq. In "Amputee," the first-person narrator is Becca, who "left one elbow joint, 28 bones, twice as many muscles and tendons, one wrist, and my entire left hand in the middle of a filleted Humvee on the outskirts of Karbala, Iraq" (41). Daniel, the protagonist of "Permanent Wave" has lost his right arm. In both stories, Schultz's protagonists fight through anger, hate, and doubt to find solace and hope. Becca reports that if she miraculously regained her arm, she would seek revenge on those who hurt her:

I just want to hurt somebody back, even though it isn't right. I know exactly what I would do, transported back to Karbala with my body whole again, a bearded Iraqi man cowering at my feet. He'd plead for his life, and I'd raise my left arm, curling my palm around his throat until he withered into ten thousand grains of sand. Can't you see it? The way this war has made us both a mess? (43)

"Amputee" recovers a bit from its rage-filled middle to end with a scene in which Becca hugs her daughter and draws comfort from "all that sweetness pressing into me through her perfect, little palm" (44). In "Permanent Wave," Daniel, missing his right arm, is feted at a Seattle Mariners game. As in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, the packed sports stadium becomes the venue in which the vexed act of showing gratitude for military service is staged on a national scale, and Schultz like Ben Fountain suggests that American mania for the faux-combat of big-time sports represents deep cultural anxieties about masculinity and patriotism. As "The Star Spangled Banner" plays before the Mariners' game, Daniel is rendered self-conscious by having to cover his heart with his left hand in full view of the packed stadium, and his embarrassment deepens when he realizes he is being coddled by the Mariner player who soft-tosses a baseball in his direction: "A sympathetic toss—nothing manly or pro-league about it—as though Daniel were a toddler and lacked the steadiness it took to complete the simple catch" (45-46). At story's end, the Mariner fans execute a wave—the sequential throwing of their hands in the air—in tribute to Daniel's service and sacrifice. The tribute is heartfelt, in its way, but undercut with tones of irony and desperation. "Forty-seven thousand fans in a

permanent wave,” Shultz’s narrator writes, “all of them shaking, cheering, waving their arms so frantically it’s like they’d give them up just to make Daniel feel whole again” (46).

The despair illustrated in Fallon’s and Schultz’s stories is intensified and made comic-grotesque in Brian Van Reet’s “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek.” Van Reet, unlike Fallon and Schultz (neither of whom served), deployed to Iraq in 2004 before leaving the Army to write. His veteran status perhaps gave him the confidence and credibility to treat his disabled protagonists more darkly and harshly than Fallon and Schultz, though even among veteran writers he seems exceptional in his willingness to portray combat disability. In almost every story in the *Fire and Forget* anthology in which “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek” appears are emotionally numbed and psychologically damaged by their deployments, but only Van Reet’s story features physically disabled characters. The story recounts its narrator Rooster’s and his best friend Slead’s participation in an Army-sponsored fishing trip for long-term Walter Reed patients:

A few weeks ago, Slead and I loaded onto a sleek tour bus. We filed behind a gaggle of other ‘wounded warriors’ –the term the Army used to refer to us in official memoranda. I guess it’s what we were, but the phrase was too cute to do our ugliness justice. (173)

The tale’s title and subject obviously tip their hat to “Big Two-Hearted River” and other stories published in Ernest Hemingway’s great collection of return-from-war stories *In Our Time* (1925). Though Hemingway does not portray physical disability, in “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek,” Rooster’s face has been horribly scarred and a hand mangled by a bomb in Iraq. Now, seething with anger and regret, he contemplates a life “transformed in a flash I could not remember” (174). As the bus rolls through Frederick, Maryland, enroute to Hunting Creek, Rooster reflects on the mindset of the citizens of the town in which he grew up:

Located on the cusp of a pass through the Appalachians, the town had changed several times during the Civil War. Each time, the citizenry had filled the streets to cheer whichever conquering army happened to be marching through. The fact had always struck me as telling. Even during our most brutal, existential war, most Americans didn’t care enough to stick their necks out for the cause. (176)

This unflattering historical vignette is echoed by the incomprehension of two current residents of Frederick, Rooster's parents. They visit him frequently at Walter Reed, but their efforts at solace irritate Rooster and he finally tells them to stop coming. "I felt awful for them," he says, "but that didn't change the fact that I felt better apart.... How could they have known their values would have lead me to this?" (178). Rooster lashes out against his parents and is prone to fits of rage-induced impulsive behavior, such as biting the head off a rainbow trout he cannot properly fillet. And Rooster's the healthy one compared to his friend Slead, who had one leg and his genitals blown off in the same blast that injured Rooster. A charismatic and energetic soldier when whole, Slead is now "Jake Barnes and Ahab rolled into one" (188) (references to the wounded protagonists of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, respectively), his self-hatred and grouse against the world amplified by the fact that his wife has left him and is now, according to a detective Slead has hired, passing the day having public sex with her new boyfriend: "Restrooms, parked cars—my man said he got footage of them in the car outside my baby's daycare" (185).

Spoiling for vengeance, Slead stalks two teenage girls playing hooky from school. He's thwarted by Rooster, and the tale ends with the two erstwhile friends wrestling each other to the ground; the trip has been a waste and their futures even bleaker than they supposed. At the tale's conclusion, Rooster walks away from Slead, back to the trailhead and "whatever waited" (190). Slead calls out after him, "Hey Rooster. It's funny. I can feel my heart beat through the leaves" (190), but Rooster is unmoved by this flicker of emotion—maybe Slead has been changed but Rooster isn't having it. "It didn't sound like something he would say," Rooster reports (190). He leaves Slead "lying against the hardwood" of a tree and brings the story to a close: "Hailstones began to fall. They hit Big Hunting Creek like bullets ricocheting off depleted uranium armor" (190). The harsh sounds and figures of speech do not bode well for Rooster and Slead. The grim and fatalistic conclusion suggests that "whatever waited" will just have to be lived through, as best anybody can, which will probably not be nearly enough. Fully imagined and instantly memorable, Rooster and Slead owe more to Flannery O'Connor's grotesque purveyors of evil in stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People" than Hemingway's stoic Jake Barnes. One hopes that Van Reet really is trying to work the same comic grotesque vein for which O'Connor is lauded, because if his rendering of the despair and self-loathing of disabled veterans is true and representative then our national predicament in regard to them is dire almost beyond repair. When something as innocuous and well-intended as a fishing trip organized on behalf of injured soldiers goes horribly awry, the prospects for

a more comprehensive and helpful suite of rehabilitation procedures equal to the needs of the war's victims seems remote.

A literary shock treatment equal to the characters' wounds themselves, "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" inspires its readers not to simplistic sentiments, but to feel troubled by their aesthetic, vicarious, and voyeuristic appreciation of the story. The disability portrayed in "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" articulates our most pressing apprehensions about war and refuses to recouch them sentimentally. Connecting sympathy for Rooster and Sled to the horror and dubious politics of the Iraq war and then coupling political outrage with commitment to veterans rehabilitation programs is actually too obvious and too easy a response to "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek," Van Reet seems to be suggesting. Fighting off too readily available emotional responses, his tale risks sensationalism and callousness to avoid the cuteness the narrator Rooster notes in the phrase "wounded warrior," a phrase too glib and precious by half. Substituting catchiness for seriousness, the euphemism tries to put a linguistic band-aid on gaping physical and emotional wounds, and only succeeds in patronizing disabled vets while infantilizing the phrase's users.

But perhaps "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek," even as it compels admiration for the audacity of its vision and skill of its execution, forecloses on other dramatic possibilities for illustrating how disabled veterans might cope with their wounds. J.K. Rowling's detective novel *The Cuckoo's Calling*, the only novel-length treatment of an Iraq or Afghanistan disabled veteran to appear so far, works against the trend of the short fiction I have discussed above by offering a more measured, more subtle, and more hopeful appreciation of how life might be lived in the wake of a catastrophic combat injury. Rowling's protagonist is Cormoran Strike, a London private detective who hobbles on a prosthetic leg the result of an IED blast in Afghanistan while serving in the British army. Strike's wound and the war in Afghanistan more generally serve as muted but persistent motifs in a novel that might proceed satisfactorily without them, so one wonders at Rowling's interest in combat disability. Could his amputated leg and military experience merely be quirks Rowling seized upon to make her detective hero more memorable? Indeed, Strike is also the estranged son of a legendary British rock star, an additional somewhat gratuitous claim to fame, but one that actually offers Strike more cache than his wound and service with the rock-and-rollers, models, fashion designers, movie-makers, debauched aristocrats, and celebrity hanger-onners who populate *The Cuckoo's Calling*. But we might also remember from the *Harry Potter* series the character of Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, who sports a prosthetic leg and a magical

glass eye the result of fighting the Dark Arts. We can also note that Rowling has lent significant vocal and financial support of The Soldier's Charity, a long-standing British institution dedicated to helping veterans.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, we can speculate that Rowling wants to make a statement about how the war is experienced among a population that is consumed by celebrity fascination and relentless self-aggrandizement, and what that might mean for soldiers whose sacrifices in an unpopular, disregarded war. An epigraph from Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* chosen by Rowling, "For in every ill-turn of fortune the most unhappy sort of unfortunate man is the one who has been happy" (10) reinforces the idea that *The Cuckoo's Calling*, besides being a detective novel, is an exploration of catastrophic combat disability.

Hired by family members to solve the murder of a glamorous fashion model named Lula Landry (nicknamed "Cuckoo"), Strike in many ways resembles typical literary private detectives who live in shabby nobility on the margins of a corrupt society it is their lot to restore one case at a time to truth and justice. Poor, homeless after a row with his long-time girlfriend, overweight, and nursing minor addictions to alcohol and nicotine, Strike suffers his lost leg as one more irritant that plagues his day-to-day life without impinging greatly on the essential solidity of his character. The novel calls attention to Strike's amputation only in moments that reveal Rowling's empathy and eye for detail:

Jamming the lit cigarette between his teeth, he pulled up his trouser leg and unlaced the strap holding the prosthesis to his thigh. Then he unrolled the gel liner from the stump of his leg and examined the end of his amputated tibia.

He was supposed to examine the skin surface for irritation every day. Now he saw the scar tissue was inflamed and over-warm. There had been various creams and powders ... dedicated to the care of this patch of skin, subject as it was these days to forces for which it had not been designated. Perhaps [his ex-lover] had thrown the corn powder and Oilateum into one of the still unpacked boxes? But he could not muster the energy to go and find out, nor did he want to refit the prosthesis just yet; and so he sat smoking on the sofa with the lower trouser leg hanging empty towards the floor, lost in thought. (213)

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<sup>7</sup> See "Statement Issued on Behalf of J.K. Rowling" on the *ABF: The Soldiers' Charity-Corporate Partners* webpage.

Strike's stoic endurance of the lingering pain and restrictions on movement that afflict him is rooted not just in his character, but his military training; Rowling writes that he manifests "the familiar soldierly state of doing what needed to be done, without question or complaint" (49). Elsewhere, Rowling states, "For all the inconveniences and hardships of military life, for all that he had emerged from the army minus half his leg, he did not regret a day of the time he had spent serving" (114). And yet, Strike even while in was ambivalent about his identity as a soldier; as an investigator of combat "Killed in Action" deaths, he had been anything but a typical "squaddie," and his decision to depart the army even though he might have remained with his amputated leg bespeaks a conflict of identity. Asked by a minor character why he left the army, Strike replies:

"Got my leg blown off," said Strike, with an honesty that was not habitual.

It was only part of the truth, but the easiest part to communicate to a stranger. He could have stayed; they had been keen to keep him; but the loss of his calf and foot had merely precipitated a decision he had felt stealing towards him in the past couple of years. He knew that his personal tipping point was drawing nearer; that moment by which, unless he left, he would find it too onerous to go, to readjust to civilian life. The army shaped you, almost imperceptibly, with the years; wore you into a surface conformity that made it easier to be swept along by the tidal force of military life. Strike had never become entirely submerged, and had chosen to go before that happened. Even so, he remembered [the army] with a fondness that was unaffected by the loss of half a limb. (87)

For Strike, the army was a phase of life and an aspect of his character, but not wholly consuming. War left enough of a mark on him in ways that now leaves him at odds, sometimes precariously but never devastatingly so, with the civilian world he has rejoined.

Strike's lost limb does disqualify him from being much of a man of action, though, in a climatic final scene he uses his prosthesis to bludgeon a prime suspect, but it has not diminished and arguably has improved other qualities. The character in *The Cuckoo's Calling* who understands Strike best is Robin Ellacott, a young temporary secretary who discovers an aptitude for detective work as she helps Strike solve Lula Landry's murder. It's hard not to see Robin as a stand-in for Rowling; not only are their names similar, and as Rowling was drawn to try her hand at a detective novel

under a pseudonym, Robin thrills at the chance to work, if but temporarily, in a profession that we learn has always interested her (one also notes the repetition of “R” and “o” in Rowling’s penname “Robert” Galbraith). Robin is immensely fond of Strike and sees in him virtues that others miss. Watching Strike arrange his belongings in the office that has now become his home, she compares the detective to her fiancé Matthew:

She knew him to be a proud and self-sufficient man; these were the things she liked and admired about him, even if the way these qualities expressed themselves—the camp bed, the boxed possessions on the landing, the empty Pot Noodle tubs in the bin—aroused the derision of such as Matthew, who assumed that anyone living in uncomfortable circumstances must have been profligate or feckless. (243)

To these qualities of pride and self-sufficiency, we might add intelligence and a passion for discovering truth and protecting those unfairly maligned. Most detective fiction heroes possess these qualities, of course, but the important point is that in *The Cuckoo’s Calling* we see Rowling deliberately and persistently associating them with a disabled veteran. We can speculate that she believes that war is an abomination that kills and maims, but also an endeavor that distinguishes those who serve, and that it might improve its participants as easily as it might destroy or debilitate them. “Nothing is an unmixed blessing” (445) Rowling quotes Horace in another chapter epigraph, and neither is Strike’s lost leg an unmixed catastrophe. The wound is unfortunate, but it does not turn Strike into an Ahab seeking monomaniacal vengeance on a cruel world. Other things, such as murder, cover-ups, and a botched investigation, are far worse. Disability, Rowling suggests, is not, ultimately, the biggest deal of all: life still retains possibility after disability and Strike’s stoic resolve not to let his wound define him serves as a salutary example in a world consumed by rampant individualism, self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, and self-pity.

The literary depiction of combat disability in Fallon’s, Schultz’s, Van Reet’s, and Rowling’s fiction thus presents an array of dramatic characterizations that range from seething self-contempt to stoic resolve, while responses to disability vary from horror to solace to respect to uncaring indifference. As we connect our thoughts about literature to our everyday actions and beliefs, we might be wary of unproductive attitudes, while drawing inspiration from portraits of strength and resourcefulness. Even more so, we acknowledge David Mitchell and Sharon

Snyder's assertion that literary explorations of disability "dismantle our alienating mythologies by risking entry into this seemingly unimaginable or uninhabitable universe" (175). "There is an honesty to the literary portrayals," continue Mitchell and Snyder, "in that they do not profess to 'solve' disability as a problem, but rather they seek to manifest the depths of doubt which reside in the recesses of the cultural imaginary..." (178). We await more fictional treatments of combat-related disability that offer new perspectives of both problems and possibilities.

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