

CHAPTER 1 • Disability in the Culture of the Weimar Republic

How did disabled people fit into the era of war and revolution, cultural experimentation, economic turmoil, and political crisis that was the Weimar Republic? What was old and what was new about the options open to them? On the one hand, many remained objects of charity or social outcasts. Some lived their lives as invalids hidden away by their ashamed families, and about seventy thousand starved to death in psychiatric institutions in the hunger years during and after World War I.¹ The presence of “crippled beggars” on the streets still recalled medieval scenes at times. Others appeared in freak shows at fairs such as Uncle Pelle’s Rummelplatz in the working-class Berlin district of Wedding, where the artist Christian Schad painted *Agosta, der Flügelmensch und Rasha, die schwarze Taube* (Agosta, the Winged Man, and Rasha, the Black Dove, 1929). But, by contrast, many other disabled people received competent medical care, rehabilitation for work, and education in regular schools or institutions for “crippled children” to become as self-supporting as possible. They lived conventional lives or more audacious ones as it suited them, finding circles of friends, acquaintances, workmates, colleagues, and comrades in which they moved and were accepted with relative ease. In a society struggling to make the transition from authoritarian empire to democracy, the life possibilities open to disabled people oscillated between limited forms of stigmatized existence and more expansive choices shaped by commitments to solidarity.

In the unstable Weimar Republic, disability became a focal point for sociopolitical and cultural controversies in newly intense ways, and ascertaining the positions of disabled people in society was a means of measuring the success of the new democracy. The Weimar constitution proclaimed the ideal of equality, but who would actually enjoy all the privileges of being a citizen in the German nation? Were people with certain types of bodies going to have fewer rights than others?² And who would decide? The masses of disabled veterans returning from World War I presented a new challenge to goals of social inclusiveness. Before the war, the problem of disability had seemed bound up to a great extent



Fig. 1. Christian Schad, *Agosta, the Winged Man, and Rasha, the Black Dove*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 120 × 80 cm. Private Collection. (Photo courtesy of Kunsthaus Zürich. © 2007 Christian Schad Stiftung Aschaffenburg/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

in the social question. At that time, disabled people were disproportionately poor children and adults or workers injured in industrial accidents, and the churches had taken the lead in caring for them before government welfare programs began.³ While the relationship between disability and class background never ceased to be significant, the war created large numbers of disabled veterans from all social classes. This meant that providing for disabled people could no longer be viewed as primarily a charitable endeavor for the poor. Rather, since healthy young men from all across the socioeconomic spectrum had suddenly become disabled in the service of the fatherland, they seemed to have an unquestionably legitimate claim to the moral and financial support necessary for reintegrating them into society. Consequently, rehabilitation professionals who had previously worked mainly with “crippled children” began to apply their expertise to the needs of disabled veterans. Furthermore, plans to rehabilitate veterans often intersected with new sorts of discourses about rehabilitating disabled workers. Improvements in prosthetic technologies, along with increasing emphasis on efficiency and modern production methods, meant that a wider range of occupations opened up to many persons with functional impairments. These transformed interrelationships between human bodies and machines had both liberating and oppressive aspects that were constant sources of political and cultural tensions.

Competing with discourses that called for rehabilitating and reintegrating disabled veterans, workers, and young people were various types of stigmatizing, eliminationist discourses that challenged the right of some disabled people to a place as equal citizens and even their right to exist. The “cult of health and beauty” associated with the life reform movement since the late nineteenth century still flourished after the war, serving in many ways to create a hostile atmosphere toward those viewed as ill, disabled, or ugly.⁴ Similarly, the discourses of degeneracy and eugenics had also begun in the late nineteenth century. The perception that the war had killed or disabled many of the healthiest young German men, however, gave a strong impetus both to postwar advocates of eugenics, who opposed squandering the nation’s resources on the “unfit” and thus wanted to limit their reproduction, and to proponents of outright “euthanasia” such as Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, who entitled their influential pamphlet of 1920 *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (Permission for the Annihilation of Lives Unworthy of Life). These eliminationist discourses became even stronger after the onset of the world economic crisis in 1929.

All of these debates—whether well intentioned or hostile—about the proper place for disabled people in society were carried out largely

by rehabilitation and medical experts, government officials, and cultural critics. That is, they were for the most part opinions of people who were not disabled about what should be done with those who were. But in the new democracy some disabled people began to assess their own situations and assert their rights in a number of ways. Disabled veterans formed large self-advocacy organizations, and disabled civilians created self-help groups that were small but significant exercises in democracy. Struggles occurred over hierarchies of disability having to do with cause (military or civilian, acquired or hereditary) and type (physical or mental). Yet for the first time some disabled people united to define their own needs, claim their civil rights, and oppose those who wanted to curtail their opportunities. In this manner, they challenged many opinions of the self-proclaimed experts.

Just as significant sociopolitical controversies were occurring over the place of disabled people in the German nation, the question of representing disability took on new dimensions in the Weimar Republic. Representations of disability were plentiful and conspicuous throughout the cultural sphere—from popular culture to high culture, from events designed for the masses to the most sophisticated works of art. Interpretations of the bodies of disabled veterans intersected with depictions of other disabled people in multitudes of ways. Large fairs and exhibitions brought disability and illness to the attention of mass audiences. For example, a Reichstag exhibition in Berlin entitled “The Wartime Care of Sick and Wounded Soldiers” drew up to 100,000 spectators in the winter of 1914–15.⁵ Later the “Gesolei” hygiene exhibition (“Gesundheit, Sozialfürsorge, Leibesübungen” or Health, Social Welfare, Exercise), which emphasized eugenics, attracted 7.5 million visitors in Düsseldorf in 1926.⁶ Popular magazines, films, and lectures interpreted the bodies of disabled veterans for a wide public.⁷ Rehabilitation manuals presented photographs of men (rarely of women) enabled to work again through the wonders of medicine and prosthetic technology. Progressive and leftist artists, photographers, and writers created a flood of images of impoverished “war cripples” and horribly wounded soldiers in order to critique militarism and social injustice. In their copious publications, advocates of eugenics attacked some disabled people as “useless eaters” and aesthetically repellent. And for the first time significant numbers of disabled people undertook to represent themselves in a variety of ways. Disabled veterans’ organizations challenged outdated stereotypes of invalidism and dependency, creating forums for dialogue and information sharing in their publications. Tens of thousands of these men participated in carefully choreographed mass demonstrations throughout Germany, confronting the public with their

disabled bodies in an attempt to voice their grievances effectively. And a few better-educated disabled people wrote autobiographical texts, historical analyses, or scholarly articles, giving their own views of their lives and the world around them.

As in the sociopolitical arena, all of these cultural representations of disability oscillated between the old and the new, between depictions of disabled people as pitiful, ill, ugly, repellent, or uncanny and those that began to imagine them as more capable, healthy, and ordinary, particularly with regard to the sphere of work. Yet the tensions between these two ways of looking at disability were not simple contrasts in black and white. In texts drawing on older iconographies of disabled people as pathetic victims, strange creatures, or human monstrosities, even these traditional figures often resonated with new meanings in the rapidly changing society that was Weimar Germany. And in innovative depictions linking disabled people and the working world—whether in photography or art—a new trend toward inclusiveness frequently seemed to come at the price of molding the compliant human body to fit into rigidly Taylorized production.

In controversies over how disability should be represented in the cultural sphere, conservative nationalists were often pitted against progressives and leftists. Believing that art should uphold the “ideal,” specifically the ideal of a strong, healthy, authoritarian nation, the conservative camp generally wanted to eliminate representations of disability, along with all other extreme images of misery, from the cultural sphere. These circles still agreed with Emperor Wilhelm II, who had condemned modern art in a speech on December 18, 1901 as follows: “If art does nothing but portray misery as even more disgusting than it actually is (which frequently happens now), art commits a sin against the German people. The cultivation of ideals is the greatest cultural task.”⁸ By contrast, progressive and leftist artists and writers did not want to blot out images of disability but rather made it into one of their most significant themes. Intensifying culturally familiar discourses about disabled people as pitiful or grotesque, they created shocking representations of disabled and wounded veterans in order to confront the public with the hollowness of nationalistic, militaristic ideals. And with their portrayals of disabled workers as functional assemblages of mechanical, prosthetic parts they created unforgettable anticapitalist images.

As is characteristic of most eras in which those creating the memorable images generally do not belong to the group they are representing, it was the ways in which disability appeared to constitute some kind of pressing social problem that caught the attention of artists, writers, critics, and other intellectuals. This means, however, that the most famous

images of disability from Weimar culture should not be misconstrued as giving a true picture of the range of experiences open to disabled citizens at this time. The bodies of disabled veterans could be infused with symbolic meanings to make statements about the German nation. The bodies of disabled workers could be depicted to make statements about the promises and perils of technology in a time of rapid social change. The bodies of those with congenital or hereditary impairments could be presented in eugenic terms as threats to the health and even the survival of the German people. But in general these well-known cultural discourses about disability were quite selective and hardly made room for other types of stories that might have shown disabled people simply as ordinary human beings. In a unique survey of a group of physically disabled people carried out by a disabled teacher in Berlin in 1932, for example, along with sad and difficult experiences, many respondents told of being accepted and supported by family and friends, finding satisfying work, and living rather contented, happy lives.⁹ Much more historical research that makes creative use of documents is needed if we are to understand how such positive experiences came about and how typical they were. Any discussion of disability in Weimar culture, however, needs to complement canonical representations by taking into account as much as possible how disabled people themselves viewed their lives and the world around them. No group of representations yields the one truth about disability, but taken together they create multilayered interweavings of embodied relationships.

This chapter focuses on the major ways in which disabled people appeared in the public sphere, were represented by others, and represented themselves during the Weimar Republic. First, I discuss the significance of disabled veterans as a large, new social group, the goals of the German rehabilitation system for them, and some culturally important reactions of these veterans to becoming disabled. Then, after briefly describing how disability and illness appear in prewar expressionism, I analyze depictions of disabled veterans in Weimar art and literature that show these figures in a socially critical manner as impoverished, pitiful, or grotesque. Next I explore the intersections between such portrayals of disabled veterans and those of workers, including photography, rehabilitation manuals, and other texts. Here the main tendency was to reflect from several perspectives on how these figures were connected through their prostheses with the technological world of machines and industry. The following sections focus on disabled civilians, particularly those groups that eugenicists targeted for elimination. Here I bring out the major ways in which the advocates of eugenics conceived of disabled people as defective and, linked to this, held much of

Weimar art to be degenerate. Finally, I present some significant examples of how disabled people formed self-advocacy organizations and wrote about their own lives and perceptions of the world around them during this period.

The Disabled Veterans Return

Organ Grinders or Respectable Citizens?

With the 2.7 million disabled or permanently ill veterans who returned from the battlefields of World War I, disability came into view in the public sphere in Germany in a different way and to a greater extent than ever before.¹⁰ Fifty years earlier, during the Franco-Prussian War, 80 to 90 percent of seriously wounded soldiers had died of infections and other complications,¹¹ and only about 70,000 “war invalids” lived through that conflict.¹² Receiving insufficient government pensions, many of these men had no alternative but begging—traditionally the only means of survival for many disabled people throughout history¹³—and so the sight of disabled veterans playing their barrel organs for a handout or selling matches and other sundries became common throughout Germany in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ By World War I, however, medical advances enabled many more soldiers to survive previously mortal wounds, and advances in rehabilitation technology made it easier for more disabled veterans to return to work. Yet in the economic and social turmoil of the postwar years the government struggled to provide the substantial resources necessary to reintegrate these men into society. In spite of great efforts to meet their needs, both economic exigencies and problematic welfare policies increasingly alienated these men from the Republic, often making them susceptible to Nazi recruitment in the later Weimar years.¹⁵

Accordingly, the sudden presence of masses of newly disabled men was one of the most pressing tests facing the new Weimar democracy. Could men with these multiple kinds of disabilities be reintegrated into the defeated nation and, if so, how? Were men with such bodies to be viewed as heroes, pitiful victims, or ordinary citizens? What was the relationship going to be between the “war disabled” and those whose disabilities had other causes (the “civilian disabled” or “peacetime disabled”)? The barrel organ became an icon of the controversies over these questions. In the tradition of the nineteenth century, hundreds of these instruments were produced in Germany as soon as the war began in 1914, indicating the widespread assumption that newly disabled veter-

ans would soon need to be playing them on the streets for alms.¹⁶ An older artist, Heinrich Zille, drew disabled organ grinders and other “crippled beggars” in their Berlin milieu in a naturalistic style that demonstrated his sympathy for these poor outcasts. An expressionist artist, Max Beckmann, however, in his *Leierkastenmann* from the *Berliner Reise* (“Organ Grinder” from the “Berlin Journey,” 1922), heightened the feelings of social fragmentation and physical grotesqueness through elongations and distortions of the disabled figures. From many quarters, voices were heard rejecting the barrel organ as an unworthy, humiliating fate, including trade union activists, rehabilitation experts, and many disabled veterans themselves. These persons argued that it would be advantageous for both individuals and society in general if these men would become self-supporting again. Social outcast or respectable citizen—these were the poles between which attitudes toward disabled veterans—and other disabled people as well—moved in the new democracy.

Rehabilitation between Conformity and Empowerment

In 1915, the orthopedic surgeon Konrad Biesalski (1868–1930) published an influential pamphlet entitled *Kriegskrüppelfürsorge: Ein Aufklärungswort zum Troste und zur Mahnung* (The Care of War Cripples: A Word of Enlightenment to Console and Admonish). Biesalski was the director of a large institution for crippled children called the Oskar-Helene Home in Berlin-Zehlendorf (today the Orthopedic Clinic of the Free University) and one of the leading rehabilitation experts in Germany. In his pamphlet, he summed up the goal of rehabilitation with the rallying cry that he wanted to create “taxpayers rather than charity recipients!” While he applied that slogan to all disabled people, he made a special point about disabled veterans: “The numerous war cripples should merge into the masses of the people as if nothing had happened to them.”¹⁷ This statement captures the contradictory tendencies in rehabilitation theory and practice at the time. On the one hand, an expert such as Biesalski viewed disabled people, and veterans in particular, as having the right to be integrated into society rather than stigmatized and as capable in almost all instances of returning to gainful employment. On the other hand, he characterized rehabilitation as a practice of forgetting the injuries of war. Consequently, this was a field in which the experts were to set the terms and which thus might be quite at odds with the actual experiences of veterans in adjusting to their disabilities. Or, to put this contradiction another way, rehabilitation could

have a democratic thrust in terms of helping disabled people regain the possibility of living full lives, but it could also have an authoritarian, repressive effect by reintegrating soldiers into the military apparatus and workers into a rigidly controlled industrial system.

Influenced by portrayals of grotesque cripples and robotic, prosthesis-wearing workers in Weimar art, cultural historians have generally emphasized the latter view of rehabilitation as having mainly the function of propping up German industrial capacity and keeping the military machine supplied with human fodder.¹⁸ If one keeps in mind the entire spectrum of the goals and effects of rehabilitation for all disabled people, however, its complexity as a cultural phenomenon becomes clearer, as some social and medical historians have demonstrated.¹⁹ The German rehabilitation system as it developed during and after World War I was not merely a terroristic system for enforcing oppressive norms, as some Foucauldians assert, even though it certainly did tend in this direction to some extent.²⁰ Beyond this, it was also known as the most advanced and best-organized rehabilitation system in the world with its mixture of church-run and state-sponsored institutions and clinics. For example, two laws passed in 1920 were models of progressive policy in this area. Broadly debated within rehabilitation, legal, and political circles, the Prussian Law on Cripples' Welfare (*Krüppelfürsorgegesetz*) was the first German law to guarantee medical treatment, education, and vocational training to young people with physical disabilities.²¹ A prominent Düsseldorf pediatrician who advocated this law described its purpose as follows: "No one in Prussia should become a cripple if this can be avoided. No cripple who can be healed or improved should have to do without the possibility of healing or improvement. No cripple who can learn an occupation should remain unemployed. No cripple should have to live in the future without love, care, and attention."²² Furthermore, promoted by social democrats, trade unions, and other groups, the Prussian Law for the Employment of the Severely Disabled (*Gesetz über die Beschäftigung Schwerbeschädigter*) established quotas for employing disabled veterans and job protections for them.²³ Consequently, in order to understand the context of artistic depictions of the entire complex of disabled veterans, rehabilitation, and prosthetic technology, it is necessary first to explicate briefly the tensions within rehabilitation theory and practice over goals and methods as well as these experts' underlying assumptions about disabled people.

The roots of the rehabilitation system for disabled veterans in Germany go back to the orthopedic treatment of "crippled" children in the nineteenth century, and this development can be followed in the career

of Konrad Biesalski. As soon as the war began, he proposed that his own children's clinic and others like it should admit disabled veterans for rehabilitation and prepare them to return not only to the army but also to their families, workplaces, and social environments.²⁴ Biesalski then applied his experiences rehabilitating disabled veterans after the war to "crippled" children and played an important role in securing the passage of the Law on Cripples' Welfare of 1920, which promised substantial improvements in the lives of disabled young people.²⁵ He began his pamphlet of 1915 by asserting that "today many thousands of our severely wounded brothers are looking fearfully with their families into the future, . . . wondering how they are to find work and bread again" (3). He thus addressed his pamphlet to disabled veterans, whom he exhorted to overcome their disabilities by following their treatment plans with steadfast willpower. Significantly, he also wanted to transform the negative attitudes of the general public toward cripples. He admonished his readers to overcome feelings of pity and revulsion and to accept these men back into their midst as valuable, capable citizens. In this connection, he declared that "the undignified sight of the war cripple as organ grinder or peddler should never be seen on our streets again" (20), and he proclaimed that "the cripple is not a repulsive picture of misery but my brother who is closer to me than ever before" (4).

Biesalski cast his own role in this process as that of the indispensable expert whose knowledge of wound management, physical therapy, and above all of prosthetic technology was crucial for rehabilitating these men. To illustrate his remarks more vividly, the pamphlet contains eighty-five photographs of successfully rehabilitated veterans, many working at various occupations while wearing prostheses. Frequently reprinted in newspapers and magazines, these photographs were part of a large visual discourse that sought to demonstrate the accomplishments of prosthetic technology. Similar images could often be seen in medical journals, advertisements of the orthopedic industry, information brochures of war cripples relief organizations, slide shows, and lectures. Furthermore, contemporary reports tell of groups taking tours through institutions for cripples in order to see for themselves what the patients could do with the help of new technologies and orthopedic appliances.²⁶

A few examples serve to illustrate how Biesalski presented the varied purposes of rehabilitation. After ten weeks of treatment, an officer with a shattered arm and shoulder was "fully healed and returned to the front" (11). Outfitted with a lightweight prosthesis nine weeks after the amputation of his left leg, a captain was able to mount a horse again (23). In other photographs, the rehabilitation process could apply to any dis-

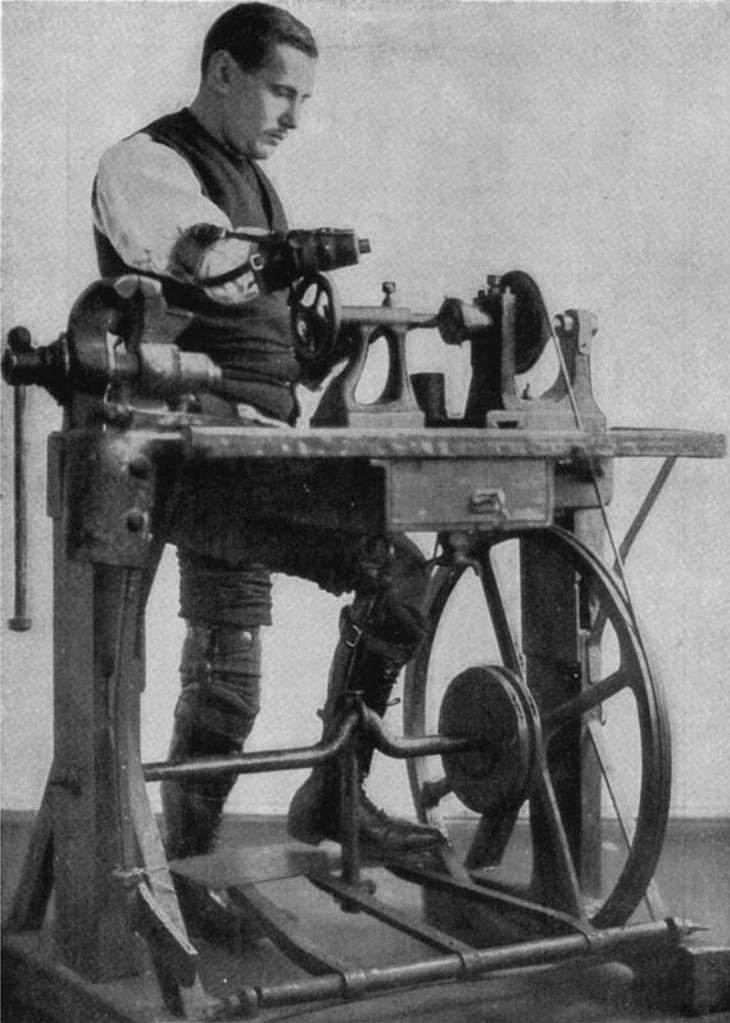


Fig. 2. “Master craftsman with no hands or feet working at the lathe, where he earns his bread like a healthy man.” (From Konrad Biesalski, *Kriegskrüppelfürsorge: Ein Aufklärungswort zum Troste und zur Mahnung* [Hamburg: Voss, 1915], 30. Courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.)

abled person, although most of the men shown were undoubtedly veterans. Wearing prostheses, men with missing limbs, including some with neither hands nor feet, are shown working at various manual occupations such as operating a drill press or lathe. As was typical for the time, disability is presented here almost solely as a male problem because of the emphasis on veterans and workers, but two photographs show a young woman born with only one hand sewing without a prosthesis and

knitting while wearing one. Obviously, Biesalski wanted rehabilitation to serve the goals of the military, but he also had a much more comprehensive conception of its goals, as he expressed in this statement: “The most important principle is that to the greatest possible extent the wounded man should return to his former workplace and live at home. No confinement in institutions or special settlements, but dispersal among the working population! No undignified welfare or charity, but work and return to his previous surroundings!” (28). Deinstitutionalization, independence, self-reliance, acceptance by others as an equal—all this had a strong democratic thrust.

By indicating the complexities of how the rehabilitation system developed in Germany in connection with World War I, it is possible to bring out some of the contradictory results for disabled people, as well as to indicate how attitudes toward them changed as a result of these developments. As a positive consequence, the public became more accustomed to the idea that disabled veterans were frequently capable of working and living more or less “normal” lives. Contrary to what happened in the aftermath of earlier wars and also to the images handed down in the best-known works of art from this period, with the backing of the new laws the vast majority of disabled veterans did return to work, though frequently as unskilled laborers in industry. As a result, leaving aside the disabled veterans whose injuries were so severe that they were not able to work at all, the unemployment rate for disabled veterans was lower than average during the Weimar Republic. In 1927, the unemployment rate in Germany was 12 percent but 8 percent for the disabled, and in March 1931 the corresponding figures were 21 versus 11 percent.²⁷

This measure of social integration of disabled veterans necessarily also had a certain positive effect on attitudes toward the practicality of integrating disabled civilians into society rather than consigning them to live as isolated, dependent invalids. For example, because so many Gymnasium graduates were blinded in the war, the *Blindenstudienanstalt* was founded in Marburg in 1916 in order to prepare blind people for university study. This did not mean that they easily found appropriate work after completing their studies, but it was an indispensable first step in opening up more possibilities for them.²⁸ In many instances, various rehabilitation experts defended their patients—whether disabled children, adults, or veterans—against racial hygienists who labeled those with certain types of disabilities as inferior, burdensome, and undeserving of the state’s financial assistance. Biesalski had maintained in his pamphlet of 1915, for example, that even those with the most severe disabilities could almost always be rehabilitated, and he showed

the photographs to prove it. At the Fourth German Congress for Cripples' Welfare, held in Cologne in 1916, one speaker stated pointedly that orthopedists and specialists in the care of cripples could and should help even children with congenital deformities (a main target of the racial hygienists) to work, marry, and raise children.²⁹ And another commentator rejected the idea in 1920 that the physically handicapped were inferior, stating that they were equal to other people and deserved the same access to treatment and care as anyone else.³⁰

Victims or Heroes? Disabled Veterans Present Themselves in the Public Sphere

During and immediately after the war, the nationalistically minded public gave extremely generous financial and moral support to disabled veterans. Furthermore, rehabilitation and legal measures sought to promote their social integration according to the terms of the experts. By the time the economic crisis began in 1929, however, the hostility of these veterans toward the Republic was a widely acknowledged fact, as was the conspicuous antagonism between them and their fellow citizens, who frequently characterized these men as a burden on the nation. In an effort to centralize government control over the provision of welfare benefits and rehabilitation, laws had been passed that strictly regulated charities and philanthropy, thus eliminating most citizens' initiatives to assist these men.³¹ At the same time, as the economic situation worsened, many people became resentful of veterans' demands for still more benefits in a time of growing crisis. It appears that the Weimar welfare state staked its reputation on the care of disabled veterans, but problematic expectations and assumptions about disabled people often undermined these efforts. With regard to pensions, the legal system placed veterans on the same level as poor people, accident victims, and invalids. Disabled veterans complained repeatedly about being viewed by other citizens and treated by the bureaucracy as "welfare cases," that is, as inferior people on the same level as the "civilian disabled." Many veterans were insulted and angered by this loss of status. As a result of all these factors, even though German disabled veterans received relatively generous benefits—in contrast to, say, British veterans—they often felt that their fellow citizens did not honor or respect them enough for their sacrifices. This increased their alienation from the Republic and made them likely candidates for Nazi recruitment.

When disabled veterans presented themselves in the public sphere, powerful discourses of disability became evident. This large group of men had recently marched off to war in nationalistic fervor with the

overwhelming support of the populace. Now, because of their newly disabled bodies, they found themselves lowered to the position of some of the most stigmatized groups in society. How did this affect their self-conceptions, and how did they deal with the fact that others suddenly viewed them differently than before? They immediately became politically active, forming large war victims' organizations to represent their interests. The journals of these organizations, along with material from pension cases and newspaper reports, tell about veterans' efforts to interpret their disabilities for themselves and to the public. The nature of these sources as highlighting abuses or complaints necessarily means that it is almost impossible to find out about disabled veterans from this time who were satisfied with the rehabilitation and medical treatment they received, those who went on to live contented family lives and find acceptable work—although this would also be an important story about disability in Germany between the world wars. In any event, the structure of the rehabilitation and legal systems meant that disabled veterans were often placed in situations in which they had to present themselves either as victims or as heroes in order to try to gain both the material support they needed to survive and the honor and recognition they craved.

From the perspective of the rehabilitation system, the reconstruction of the bodies of disabled veterans was a highly successful example of modern technological progress. Experts such as Biesalski urged these men to overcome their disabilities by reestablishing normative ways of physical functioning. Many of the veterans themselves, however, interpreted their disabilities as terrible diminishment of their lives that were extremely difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. Biesalski and his colleagues often expressed a one-sidedly cheerful, can-do attitude that came across as a lack of empathy for the enormous losses these veterans had experienced. In 1918, one of the major war victims' organizations, the Reichsbund der Kriegs- und Zivilbeschädigten, Sozialrentner und Hinterbliebenen, for example, criticized a rehabilitation exhibition of photographs that showed how easy it supposedly was for disabled veterans wearing prostheses to take up their former work and hobbies again. The Reichsbund took the exhibition to task for creating the false impression that it was a "pleasure to have to go through life with just one leg!"³² Or in his diary, Victor Klemperer expressed outrage at a rehabilitation exhibition in Leipzig for the "tactless" way it displayed blind war veterans performing various kinds of work, comparing the scene to watching animals in a zoo.³³

To promote the approach of the rehabilitation experts, an aristocrat with one arm named Freiherr Eberhard von Künssberg wrote a fre-

quently republished self-help manual entitled *Einarm-Fibel: Ein Lehr-, Lese- und Bilderbuch für Einarmer* (One-Arm Primer: A Book of Instruction, with Text and Pictures, for the One-Armed, 1915). Featuring a drawing of Götz von Berlichingen's "iron hand" on the cover, the pamphlet exhorted these veterans to take pride in their war injuries and master the use of their new prostheses in order to continue serving the fatherland through work. By contrast, however, the autobiography of Carl Herrmann Unthan, entitled *Das Pediskript: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Leben eines Armlosen* (Pediscript: Notes from the Life of an Armless Man, 1925), furnishes a significant counternarrative to that of the rehabilitation experts. Unthan was born without arms in 1848 in East Prussia to a loving family that encouraged him as much as possible. As an adult, he traveled with various impresarios and fairs throughout Europe, the United States, Mexico, Cuba, and Russia, displaying to the public what he could do with his feet. He wrote that he chose this life because he could find no other way to make as much money as he wanted. In the concluding section, illustrated with photographs, Unthan explained how he performed activities of daily life such as washing, dressing, eating, writing, playing chess, and so forth, hoping that this information would be useful to both children born without arms and newly disabled adults. He recounted going to military hospitals and speaking to veterans whose arms had been amputated, stating that he had met with quite an unenthusiastic reception from officials when he proposed this initiative. Probably this coolness was partly due to Unthan's success in living independently without prostheses and his strong skepticism toward the rehabilitation system for its emphasis on prosthetic technology. For example, he mentioned the veteran known as the "Hoeftmansche Mann," whose legs and arms had been amputated and who had been displayed at rehabilitation conferences working with his prostheses as a machinist. Unthan claimed that in fact this man never went back to work at his trade but made his living appearing at such conferences.³⁴ The thrust of Unthan's remarks was to argue that nonnormative ways of using one's body might in fact be more satisfying and successful for the individual. On the other hand, he said little about how disabled veterans received his message. It is easy to imagine that many of them—sharing the prejudices of their time—would not have wanted to be associated too closely with such a "freak."

In their desperation over their newly acquired disabilities, some veterans turned to what had frequently been the only option open to poor disabled people throughout history. They became beggars, presenting themselves as victims rather than heroes. In turn, rejecting this public image, the war victims' organizations often participated in official gov-

ernment efforts to eradicate begging.³⁵ The sight of disabled men begging in the streets while wearing their uniforms and Iron Crosses was so conspicuous and disturbing that it drew comments from all sides. In a diary entry from December 1918, for example, Evelyn Blücher made this observation about the striking street scenes she witnessed in Berlin: “All the blind, the halt, and the lame of Prussia seem to have collected here.”³⁶ Immediately after the war, the press was full of articles about the “plague of beggars.” Journalists often criticized these veterans from an aesthetic standpoint for offensively confronting the postwar public. On November 26, 1919, for example, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* took men to task “who take to begging while insistently emphasizing their suffering and present an ugly sight in the streets and squares of the big cities.”³⁷ This entire phenomenon, however, was more complex than it appeared on the surface. For, when welfare officials investigated the “mass epidemic” of military beggars in 1919–20, they found that many were either disabled civilians or nondisabled people feigning ailments who found that they received larger handouts when they put on a uniform.³⁸ In turn, this “comedy of misery” fueled major ongoing controversies over malingering (*Simulantentum*) and pension psychosis (*Rentenpsychose*) throughout the Weimar era, particularly with regard to psychiatrists’ doubts about veterans’ claims of mental illness—the so-called war neurotics or *Kriegszitterer* (war shiverers).³⁹ It also furnished plentiful material for a writer such as Bertolt Brecht, whose *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera, 1928) took up the theme of begging to point out in an entertaining way how ludicrous it was to expect human sympathy in a capitalist society based solely on profit.

If some disabled veterans took the individual step of presenting themselves as beggars, the demonstrations of disabled veterans that took place in the economic chaos of the early and late Weimar years were self-presentations on a massive scale. Usually organized by the local branches of the war victims’ associations, these demonstrations were concerted efforts of disabled veterans to make themselves visible to the public and interpret the meaning of their bodies for the nation. They demanded material assistance from the state, such as improved pensions, but they also wanted moral support and recognition for their sacrifices from the public. Often bitter at feeling cast aside, these veterans frequently marched carrying banners with the slogan “Is this the thanks of the fatherland?” The demonstrations were carefully choreographed in order to create the most provocative visual effect.⁴⁰ They were usually led by men with the worst injuries: amputees in wheelchairs or on open carts and blind men led by family members or guide dogs. Widows and orphans accompanied the men. The press com-



Fig. 3. Disabled veteran begging in Berlin after World War I. (Photo: akg-images.)

mented on these spectacles as bitter parodies of the enthusiastic columns that had marched off to war in 1914. For example, the largest such rally of the Reichsbund took place on December 22, 1918, in Berlin, when ten thousand war victims marched to the War Ministry demanding better care and greater honor.⁴¹ These parades became a subject for a socially critical artist such as Otto Dix, as well as for Weimar authors such as Leonhard Frank and Erich Maria Remarque.

In these self-presentations, disabled veterans offensively stylized themselves as victims, but, on the other hand, they were frequently shocked when others treated them as outcasts, supplicants, and second-class people. With all their might, they resisted the humiliations that many other disabled people had always experienced. Suddenly, rather than being unquestionably accepted in their nation and communities, they were set apart as objects of curiosity. For example, a journalist described the public that gathered to watch hospital trains unloading the wounded as gossiping and nearly twisting their heads off staring, “as if monkeys and camels were coming.”⁴² Some veterans complained that young people mocked them, for example, by imitating the way amputees walked.⁴³ Others were enraged over finding themselves the object of revulsion. One amputee angrily reported a comment made by a woman who was staring at him during a theater performance: “God, isn’t that

disgusting! They could have left that one behind!”⁴⁴ Along with such difficult interactions in daily life, the structure of the pension system often forced disabled veterans to present themselves as invalids in order to obtain financial support—an impossible contradiction to the rehabilitation experts’ demand that they should “overcome” their disabilities through heroic willpower. A typical complaint of such veterans went: “The war-disabled are men and not dogs, as so many people unfortunately think today.”⁴⁵ The Nazi Party capitalized on this alienation of many disabled veterans from the Republic, establishing a special section for war victims in its directorate in September 1930. The party began to recruit disabled veterans with the slogan “Even a poor fatherland can be grateful,” and this opportunistic promise of recognition fell on fertile soil among this disaffected group. After Hitler came to power in 1933, while the financial situation of disabled veterans did not improve significantly, they were repeatedly honored in mass ceremonies as the “first citizens of the nation.”⁴⁶ Even as the Nazis began planning for the compulsory sterilization and “euthanasia” of people with certain hereditary disabilities, they praised disabled veterans for their sacrifices to the nation on the battlefield.

Disabled Veterans and Workers in Weimar Art and Literature

Illness and Disability in Prewar Expressionism

In the sphere of high culture, expressionism marks the transition between old prewar and new postwar ways of representing disability, of suffusing particular kinds of bodies with meanings. To an extent not found since romanticism, expressionist artists and writers made human suffering their theme, and from about 1910 to 1915 in particular they created innumerable depictions of illness—that is, disease. At this time, they were particularly fascinated with insanity and altered psychic states but depicted physical disabilities relatively infrequently.⁴⁷ In general, the interest of the expressionists in these themes arose from their concern with extreme human experiences located outside respectable bourgeois social conventions and aesthetic norms. Within this common basis, however, they took many different approaches. Accordingly, some represented the suffering person as mute, cast down, and destroyed by illness, whereby the individual often symbolizes the existential pain of all creatures. On the other hand, for many expressionists it was precisely the extremity of illness that could lead to spiritual or

religious renewal, emotional refinement, and emancipatory, redemptive, or utopian moments. Illness in their works can thus be an overpowering, destructive force or a catalyst for breaking through claustrophobic restrictions.

On the whole, prewar expressionist depictions of illness, insanity, and disability aimed to make general statements about the human condition rather than situating these experiences in any specific, readily identifiable social context. A good illustration of this approach in art is the numerous portrayals of ill people—children, women, and men—by artists such as Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, which strive to capture inner emotional states rather than being painted in the style of representative individual portraits.⁴⁸ In literature, for example, Georg Heym's poems and short stories on the theme of insanity written in 1910–11 demonstrate a typical expressionist fascination with the hell of the insane asylum and with the exaggerated emotional intensity of abnormal mental states.⁴⁹ In his short story "Der Irre" (The Insane Man, 1911), a mentally ill man depicted as psychotic, paranoid, megalomaniacal, and apelike goes on a murderous rampage until he is finally shot and dies in ecstasy.⁵⁰ Similarly, the disabled figures in Heym's poems, including "Der Bucklige" (The Hunchback), "Der Blinde" (The Blind Man), "Der Bettler" (The Beggar), "Die blinden Frauen" (The Blind Women), "Die Tauben" (The Deaf People), and "Ganz dicht aufeinander . . ." (Very Close atop Each Other), are all shown in an abstract, timeless way, symbolizing deep isolation and sadness, bitter resentment and envy, or frantic, sometimes grotesque efforts to move from darkness to light.⁵¹ Similar examples may be found in works by authors such as Ernst Barlach, Johannes R. Becher, Kasimir Edschmid, Walter Hasenclever, Jakob van Hoddis, Klabund, Georg Trakl, and Franz Werfel.⁵² In this manner, these expressionist artists and writers achieved a new, antibourgeois intensity while continuing to employ old, familiar metaphors of illness and disability.

"Those in the Darkness No One Sees": The Threat of Disability Made Visible

Visual artists took up the subject of disability more often during the Weimar era than at any other time in German cultural history except perhaps for the frequent depictions of crippled beggars in medieval religious art. As soon as disabled and wounded veterans began returning from the front, the bodies of these men became major themes for the visual arts and to a lesser extent for literature as well. Gendering disability as masculine, artists frequently linked the figures of the disabled

veteran and the misshapen, syphilitic prostitute as casualties of war and postwar metropolitan life. In formal terms, depictions of the shattered bodies of disabled and wounded veterans correspond to the dismembered female bodies in the *Lustmord* (sexual murder) paintings of these artists around 1918.⁵³ In contrast to the later devastation of Germany in World War II, World War I had not been fought inside German borders, and so the bodies of disabled veterans were the most visible reminders of that war. This was surely a fundamental reason why the mutilated, amputated bodies of some of these men became sites of intense struggle over cultural representation and national memory. In the chaotic immediate postwar years, progressive and leftist artists and writers turned to depictions of disability in their search for convincing ways to denounce German militarism and capitalism.

The selectiveness of Weimar artists and writers in choosing to depict certain types of disabilities shows how they made disability into a discourse with specific goals in mind. The majority of disabled veterans did not have obvious injuries or severe wounds but rather, for example, stomach disorders or less conspicuous mobility difficulties. Yet the disabled veterans depicted in art and literature are generally shown as horribly disfigured, with their amputated limbs, grotesque facial wounds, or bodies trembling from nervous shock. In particular, the veteran using crutches with one or both legs amputated became an iconic figure in Weimar art, surely because this seemed to be a particularly helpless figure. Furthermore, although the majority of disabled veterans were provided for by the state, at least to some extent, artists often chose to depict veteran amputees as beggars, as relegated to the lowest possible socioeconomic status, in order to attack the militaristic system that had created such misery. These artists selected the most visually striking features to lend their works socially critical force. They associated disability with the ugly, pitiful, and grotesque, seeking to shock the public by portraying veterans as reduced to the level of other disabled people who had so frequently been social and aesthetic outcasts.

As soon as disabled veterans began returning from the front, many artists moving in the orbit of expressionism began to shift from timeless depictions of suffering and illness to concrete social references to the war. They now portrayed wounded, mutilated, insane soldiers who contrasted starkly with all official efforts to promote patriotism by presenting these men as strong, virile heroes. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who had suffered a nervous collapse while in the military, painted himself in uniform in his well-known *Selbstporträt als Soldat* (Self-Portrait as a Soldier, 1915), in which his right arm with the hand used for painting appears as a bloody stump. A similar perspective comes through in Max

Pechstein's drawing of an amputee entitled *Der Gärtner, Somme IX* (The Gardener, Somme IX) and especially in works by Erich Heckel such as the etching *Straße in Ostende* (Street in Ostende, which shows an amputee using crutches) from 1915; the woodcuts *Im Lazarett* (In the Military Hospital), *Zwei Verwundete* (Two Wounded Men), and *Verwundeter Matrose* (Wounded Sailor) from 1915; and the lithographs *Irrer Soldat* (Insane Soldier) and *Krüppel am Meer* (Cripple at the Sea) from 1916.

It was at the end of the war, however, when masses of disabled veterans appeared as an easily identifiable group in a society torn by violent political conflict and economic chaos, that a flood of depictions of these men began to appear in the visual arts, most notably in works by Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Heinrich Hoerle. With the turn of most artists to a more "objective" style after relative economic stabilization in 1923, such images dwindled to a large extent, although a few of the most memorable depictions of disabled veterans were created by artists and writers in the middle and later years of the Weimar Republic.

In his autobiography of 1946, George Grosz recalled what struck him the most upon returning to Berlin in 1916 after being discharged from the army. He described the sights that he immediately took as subjects for his antimilitaristic, satirical drawings and paintings: "The Berlin to which I returned was cold and gray. . . . The same soldiers who were seen in the cafés and wine cellars singing, dancing, and clinging drunkenly to the arms of prostitutes, were to be seen later dirty and unkempt, dragging their weary way from station to station. . . . My drawings expressed my despair, hate and disillusionment. I had utter contempt for mankind in general. . . . I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crustacean-like steel arms; two medical soldiers putting a violent infantryman into a strait-jacket made of a horse blanket; a one-armed soldier saluting a lady decorated with medals who was putting a cookie on his bed; a colonel, his fly open, embracing a nurse; a medical orderly emptying into a pit a pail filled with various parts of the human body."⁵⁴ This passage may be used as a guide through the portrayals of disability in Weimar art and literature. First, Grosz did not turn his gaze away from any sight—no matter how horrible—in postwar Germany. He was determined to face everything. Like many other artists of the time, he linked the soldier/disabled veteran and the prostitute as conspicuous male and female counterparts in the gray postwar chaos of the metropolis. Second, while he of course viewed disabled veterans as impoverished, pitiful victims in certain ways, he also emphasized that many of them had learned nothing from their terrible experiences and were still willing cogs in a militaristic, authoritarian system. Finally, as an artist he was

fascinated with the new forms on display: the shape of wounds, the prostheses that created grotesque intersections between technology and the body, and the disposable nature of the human being.

Max Beckmann used disabled figures in his portfolio of ten lithographs entitled *Die Hölle* (Hell, 1919) in order to bring out one of its main themes: the commitment to seeing rather than turning away from the violence of war and the misery it causes. Like a circus barker, the artist beckons his audience on the title page to draw near and see for itself the brutal reality of postwar Germany. In the first plate, *Nachhauseweg* (The Way Home), two figures face each other beneath a street lamp. One is a veteran whose face has been largely blown away; he is without a nose and almost eyeless. The stump of his arm protrudes from his sleeve, which the other figure, Beckmann himself, grips with one hand while pointing “the way home” with the other. In the background, two crippled veterans hobble along on crutches behind a prostitute. It is not clear whether the wounded veteran can see where Beckmann’s finger is pointing. But Beckmann is looking intently at the veteran’s terribly disfigured head, to which the lithograph draws the viewer’s gaze. The second plate, *Die Straße* (The Street), includes a disabled veteran using a clumsy wheelchair along with a blind beggar in the chaotic clinch of bodies on the street during the November Revolution. Disability becomes a formal organizing principle in this fragmented, compressed jumble of limbs. The viewer must look closely to discern where one body ends and another begins; where body and inanimate object merge. If these lithographs employ images of disability to insist on acknowledging the horrible results of war, Beckmann references disability in another way in plate 6, *Die Nacht* (Night), which duplicates a famous painting of the same name that he completed just before beginning the *Hölle* portfolio. The head of a vicious intruder holding a child under his arm is taken from a portrayal of a blind beggar in the fresco *The Triumph of Death* (1355) in the Camposanto in Pisa, possibly by Francesco Traini.⁵⁵ In the fresco, the crippled beggars longing for release are ignored by Death, who is felling the young, beautiful, and wealthy. This reference intensifies the allegory in Beckmann’s painting of “blind” violence raging among human beings who have no hope of salvation.

These Weimar artists were determined to depict disability caused by the war so disturbingly that viewers could not turn their gaze away. In their works portraying disabled veterans mainly as impoverished, pitiful, grotesque victims, Weimar artists generally aimed to attack militaristic authoritarianism and the heartlessness of a capitalist society based only on profit and later, after the economic situation had become



Fig. 4. Max Beckmann, *Hell: The Way Home*, 1919. Lithograph, 87 × 61 cm. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. (© 2007 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

more stable, the superficiality of a materialistic society. Numerous works by George Grosz and Otto Dix take this approach. In 1921, for example, Grosz illustrated a pamphlet by Willi Schuster with the title *Der Dank des Vaterlandes* (The Thanks of the Fatherland). The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) used this phrase and Grosz's cover drawing in 1924 on its election posters, thus illustrating how central discourses

about disability were in the sphere of politics.⁵⁶ Schuster's vignettes of street scenes in Berlin contrasted ostentatious rich people with miserable disabled veterans begging for a handout. Describing his times as "the era of war cripples, the blind, the mutilated, the lost," he called for these men to unite with the proletariat and overthrow capitalism.⁵⁷ Grosz's accompanying drawings show a sad amputee selling matches with his little daughter, pitiful amputees begging from fat, well-to-do members of the bourgeoisie, and men on crutches holding out their caps for alms. One of Grosz's best-known paintings from the same year, *Grauer Tag* (Gray Day, 1921), which was exhibited at the Mannheim Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) exhibition in 1925 under the title *Magistratsbeamter für Kriegsbeschädigtenfürsorge* (State Functionary for the Welfare of the War Disabled), takes the same approach. Here a satirically portrayed, well-dressed official turns his back on a faceless worker carrying a shovel and on a downcast veteran with an amputated right arm who is walking with the help of a crude stick. The wall separating the official from these two figures indicates the state's indifference toward those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

In his portfolio of fifty etchings entitled *Der Krieg* (War, 1924), Otto Dix created one of the most memorable graphic cycles condemning war and documenting its victims. About these works, Dix stated that, in contrast to the expressionists, he wanted "no ecstatic exaggerations" but rather wanted to portray "objectively" the consequences of war.⁵⁸ It was precisely this commitment to almost documentary truthfulness that caused these works to attract an enormous amount of notice. The war victims portrayed in this cycle include the subjects of Dix's *Verwundeter* (Wounded Man), which features a man lying in a twisted position with terrified eyes; *Nächtliche Begegnung mit einem Irrsinnigen* (Nocturnal Encounter with a Lunatic), in which a figure stands before the war-ravaged landscape of the front; *Die Irrsinnige von Sainte-Marie-à-Py* (The Madwoman of Sainte-Marie-à-Py), an infrequent depiction of an insane woman in front of a destroyed house; and *Transplantation* (Skin Graft), which portrays a soldier with a huge facial wound. In *Appell der Zurückgekehrten* (Roll Call of the Returning Troops), an officer faces a line of six ragged men who are blind, mutilated, crippled, or dazed. This image recalls with bitter irony the huge, nationalistic parades of healthy young soldiers who had marched off enthusiastically into war ten years earlier. Accordingly, Dix's portrayals of the devastation caused by armed conflict provoked controversies between those who did not want to see these disabled and wounded victims made visible in the cultural sphere and those who accepted these sights as necessary shocks that might promote antiwar positions.

The depiction of facial wounds in art and photography provides a particularly clear instance of the form some of these controversies took over whether and why certain types of disabled war victims should be shown in public. That those with such wounds (one source estimates that three hundred thousand veterans had head injuries) were considered to be disabled was made clear by one commentator in 1916, who stated: “The special characteristic of this type of invalidism . . . is loss in an aesthetic sense, that is, inferiority in outward appearance.”⁵⁹ One railroad worker poignantly described the effects of his facial injury in a letter protesting the government’s denial of pension benefits to him, saying that he did not dare to go out in public because people took such offense at his disfigurement, that he was afraid he would never be able to marry, and that as a result he felt he was no longer a “full-valued member of human society.”⁶⁰ Medical science frequently documented these wounds with photographs and wax images, and in 1916 a journal of popular science called *Die Umschau* (The Review) published medical photographs of some of these men. Later on, however, these images disappeared from public view, just as some of the most badly disfigured men remained hidden away in military hospitals, not daring to go out in public or even allow relatives to see them. Artists such as Grosz, Dix, and Beckmann created a few images of veterans with facial wounds, but they much preferred to depict veterans as crippled beggars and amputees with grotesque prostheses. They did this in order to emphasize how the war had rendered these formerly virile men helpless and to denounce militaristic atrocities and Taylorist applications of technology.

In 1924, however, the year in which Dix created *Der Krieg* and anti-war commemorations took place all over Germany, the pacifist Ernst Friedrich published a book, *Krieg dem Kriege!* (War on War!), which included photographs of veterans with gruesome facial wounds. Intending to shock the public into antimilitarist opposition, Friedrich also displayed some of these photographs in the storefront window of his Anti-war Museum in Berlin. The Berlin police immediately prohibited the display and confiscated the photographs. While a few pacifist and social democratic groups exhibited some of the photographs in other places, nationalist organizations protested the book and even attempted to have it banned, calling it “an incredible, insidious calumny against the old army.”⁶¹ The controversy revolved around the fact that showing men with such extreme disfigurements to the public undermined the rhetoric of heroism and honor necessary to link them with the German nation. The documentary photographs in Friedrich’s book elicited a stronger reaction than a work of art such as Dix’s etching *Transplantation*, which—while certainly not aestheticizing the facial wound—is less



Fig. 5. “‘War agrees with me like a stay at a health resort.’ (Hindenburg).” (From Ernst Friedrich, *Krieg dem Kriege!* [Berlin: Freie Jugend, 1924]. Courtesy of the Dartmouth College Library.)

shocking than a photograph due to the artistic fascination with form and composition. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote in 1924 about Dix’s cycle, “The content of these visions would be unbearable if not for the fact that a great creative talent has shaped the horror into artistic forms.”⁶² Accordingly, Dix’s etchings of disabled and wounded war victims were successfully exhibited, whereas the photographs of these men in Friedrich’s book were banned from public view.

Dix painted one more major work depicting the disabled veteran as victim: the triptych *Großstadt* (Metropolis), which he created in 1927–28 in the style of the late medieval masters. The central panel depicts with grotesque irony a stylish group of men and women dancing to a jazz band. This scene from the so-called Roaring Twenties resonates with many layers of meaning due to its juxtaposition with the two side panels, where Dix’s iconic figures of the prostitute and the war cripple appear. In the right panel, high-class prostitutes parade past lavish theater scenery, ignoring a drably clothed war cripple sitting on the ground. He displays the naked stumps of his amputated legs, wears a small black patch over his missing nose and facial wound, and holds his hat in his lap to beg for alms. Stigmatized and outcast because of his disability and

disfigurement, he looks down in shame rather than at the nude or extravagantly dressed women. In contrast to the pompous architecture of the right panel, the left panel shows a desolate cobblestone street under an elevated railroad track. Cheaply dressed prostitutes point the way to a brothel, and a drunken man lies on the street. Standing over him is a war cripple, the dominant figure in the panel. He wears an old uniform, and both of his legs have been amputated. Unlike the beggar in the right panel, however, his stumps fit into medieval-looking wooden peg legs, and he supports himself on a primitive wooden crutch. A dog barks at him, marking him as an intruder. This man is not ashamed but rather is looking intently at the prostitutes, whom he undoubtedly wants but cannot afford.

On the one hand, the most obvious meaning here is that these disabled veterans and others like them are victims, excluded from the erotic, materialistic swirl of life around them. On the other hand, though, Dix gave the disabled veteran on the left his own features, and the veteran's gaze extends across all three panels. This identification of the artist with the disabled veteran's perspective makes him the central figure of the painting as he observes what has been termed "this modern dance of death."⁶³ Because of his disabled, stigmatized body he sees through the empty materialism and pleasure seeking of a society that would like nothing better than to forget the horrors of the past. He longs for the temptations and forgetfulness that he sees, and at the same time his distance from them serves to bring out their superficiality. This validation of the war cripple's perspective indicates the complex relationship between disability and truth, for his disability serves to both exclude him and enable him to see beneath the surface of things.

In the same year in which Dix completed his triptych, the author Bertolt Brecht and the composer Kurt Weill created the biggest hit of the 1928 Berlin theater season, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera). In this musical drama featuring criminals, prostitutes, and corrupt officials, Brecht employed his entertaining, thought-provoking theatrical techniques of alienation to displace current German discourses about disability into the London underworld. There are two main ways in which the play takes up the themes of disabled people as victims and explores what happens when disability becomes visible in the public sphere. First, Peachum's scenes as the beggar king clearly reference issues having to do with disabled veterans in Weimar Germany: the sight of veterans as beggars; the question of malingering; and the connections among cripples, begging, and poverty.⁶⁴ Peachum provides prospective beggars with costumes that he characterizes as the "basic

types of misery,” including the victims of war and technological progress (industrial and traffic accidents). He describes the disguise of a traumatized veteran as follows: “The annoying shiverer, harasses the passers-by, [and] evokes disgust that is lessened by his medals.”⁶⁵ Peachum’s business is to defraud members of the public by putting them in an unnatural state in which they feel compassion and are willing to part with their money. Here Brecht refunctioned the traditional image of the crippled beggar. Whereas earlier Christian iconography portrayed this pitiful figure as an opportunity for others to do good works by giving alms, Brecht used these likable malingerers in a comic yet serious way to poke fun at a capitalist society in which everyone is out for himself and money rules the world.

In these scenes, the disabled victims are not what they seem to be, but when the sheriff is about to arrest Peachum he threatens to unleash a huge “demonstration of misery” in order to disrupt the queen’s coronation. In a scene that recalls the mass demonstrations of disabled veterans in Weimar Germany, Peachum has his beggars set about painting signs with slogans such as “I gave my eye for the king.” Having observed that the propertied classes can create misery but cannot bear to see it, he describes how unpleasant it would be for the queen to confront hundreds of people with mutilations and facial sores. He muses to the sheriff: “What will it look like if six hundred poor cripples have to be beaten down with clubs at the coronation? It would look bad. Disgusting is how it would look” (466). The threat that the poorest of the poor, the cripples, might invade the sphere of the wealthy and powerful is too much for the sheriff, who abandons his plan to arrest Peachum. The version of the final song that closes the film adaptation of the play, *Dreigroschenfilm* (Threepenny Film, 1930), captures ironically the stigmatized, invisible position not only of the poor in capitalist society but of people who are disabled and ill, outcasts of all sorts: “For some are in the dark / And the others are in the light. / And one sees those in the light. / Those in the darkness no one sees” (497).

“Four of These Don’t Add up to a Whole Man”: Disabled Veterans as Holdovers of Militarism

While the works discussed up to this point portray disabled veterans largely as victims, Weimar artists—whether in the phases of experimental dadaism, socially critical verism, or new objectivity—presented social misery in a very different way from the older naturalists, who sought to inspire sympathy for such figures, or the prewar expressionists with their evocations of human pathos. Frequently, these artists

depicted such victims in a merciless way, showing them as grotesque, repellent men who had learned nothing from their war experiences. Consequently, they hardly seemed any different from the militarists, industrialists, and representatives of the bourgeoisie who had brought about the war and the ensuing social chaos. Grosz's illustrations for Schuster's book, for example, show begging disabled officers still proudly wearing their medals and Iron Crosses and one even blaring out "Deutschland über alles" on his portable gramophone. Taking the approach of total satire, Grosz made his disabled veterans appear just as unsavory as the piggish capitalists or the brutal, steel-helmeted, military men he frequently excoriated.

In such works of art, the prosthesis—marking the juncture between technology and human flesh—became an organizing principle.⁶⁶ Grosz heightened the grotesqueness of these figures by drawing jumbles of their leg and arm prostheses, crutches, and canes. As an artist, he was horrified by yet fascinated with the new forms on display: the shapes of wounds, the inventive new prosthetic technologies. In a similar manner, in *Früchte im Baum der Ebert-Republik* (Fruits in the Tree of the Ebert Republic, 1921) Heinrich Hoerle drew all kinds of fantastic prostheses hanging from the limbs of a tree. Such artists interpreted prostheses critically, as symbols of the disposable nature of the human being in the militaristic, nationalistic war machine and in the mechanized, industrial capitalist system. Angered by the seemingly unstoppable momentum of this destructive process, they portrayed wounded and disabled veterans with grotesque prostheses as complicit in this oppressive system, as part of an uninterrupted cycle of repetitive slaughter.

Otto Dix's four paintings of 1920, which have been termed his "prosthesis-wearers' series," are the most substantial, multilayered artistic reflections on the meaning of prosthesis in this sense.⁶⁷ An influential forerunner of these works is Brueghel's famous painting *The Cripples* (1568), in which the grotesque, crutch-using, amputated figures appear both as bitter social caricatures and as suffering outcasts. Depicting prostheses as a way to reflect on nationalism and technology, Dix was responding not only to the war but also to the reactionary Kapp Putsch of March 1920. The theme of corporeal fragmentation enters into the physical composition of these works through the use of collage: Dix pasted elements such as newspapers, hair, photographs, and pamphlets into the paintings. From impossibly mutilated survivors to men with the most fanciful prostheses, the figures in these four paintings present exaggeratedly grotesque views of disability in order to intensify symbolic meanings.

In *Der Streichholzhändler I* (Match Seller I), a man identifiable as a

veteran by his old uniform cap sits on the pavement. Black glasses indicate his blindness, he has lost both arms, and his two leg stumps fit into short wooden peg legs. His amputated legs are made even more conspicuous in contrast to the elongated legs of three passersby, who want to avoid him and are striding away from him. As a final indignity, a dachshund lifts its leg to urinate on him. This painting leaves somewhat more room for empathy with the disabled veteran than the other three in the cycle do since he appears isolated and poor and is not identified as an officer or medal wearer. His prostheses simply underscore his helplessness and vulnerability.

The three remaining paintings focus in varying ways on the political implications of the artificial body or body parts. Two war cripples appear in *Prager Straße (Meinen Zeitgenossen gewidmet)* (Prague Street, Dedicated to My Contemporaries). In the background of this main shopping street in Dresden are two store windows: one a beauty salon (women's sphere) with manikin heads and the other an orthopedic appliance shop with artificial limbs for sale (to men). This juxtaposition indicates the feminized, passive position of disabled veterans. One man sits on the ground in front of the windows. Wearing impossible prostheses, his legs appear as two sticks, and his left arm is a strange mechanical apparatus. His right hand is held out for alms. The other veteran, wearing a medal, is missing the entire lower half of his body. Seated on a rolling platform, he propels himself along with two sticks. (Photographs of disabled veterans in Germany after both world wars show that such makeshift conveyances were in fact used at times.) Whereas the first veteran has a forlorn expression, the pompous military bearing of the second half man wearing a bowler hat heightens the grotesque effect.

Dix employed a similar style in *Die Skatspieler* (Skat Players, also known as Crippled War Veterans Playing Cards), which has been termed the most important antiwar picture ever produced by a German artist.⁶⁸ Here three disabled veterans identified as officers by their posture and medals are playing cards at a coffeehouse table. Each man has injuries that could not possibly be survived and wears fantastic prostheses. The veteran on the left is the only man who still has one leg. He holds his cards in his one remaining foot while resting his sticklike hand prosthesis on the table. He is blind and wounded in the face, and he has a long, snakelike ear trumpet. The central figure, missing all four limbs, plays cards with his teeth while his head is filled with pornographic fantasies of women. The wearer of the Iron Cross on the right, an officer with smartly parted hair, holds a card before his missing nose with his robotic arm. To underscore the cynicism of trying to put such destroyed men



Fig. 6. Otto Dix, *The Skat Players (Crippled War Veterans Playing Cards)*, 1920. Oil and collage on canvas, 110 × 87 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. (Photo by Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York. © 2007 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

back together again, this last figure is wearing a special prosthesis for his missing jaw. It has Dix's photograph on it along with the label "Lower jaw: prosthesis brand: Dix. Only genuine with the photograph of the inventor."

One art critic has stated that perhaps no other painting portrays the mutilated human being so pitilessly.⁶⁹ Through the intertwining of pros-

theses with chair and table legs and the impossible contortions of limbs and various apparatuses, the composition of the painting causes the viewer to look closely, with cold or perhaps amused curiosity, in order to discern how everything functions together, to determine what is human and what is inanimate matter. That is, the painting creates a freak show effect, an ambivalent fascination with the three war cripples, who are also presented in a radically negative manner as representatives of the war machine. The grotesqueness of their prostheses marks them with bitter irony as monstrous holdovers of an authoritarian system. They are still dyed-in-the-wool militarists, and they keep on playing their game the way they have always played it.

The fourth painting, *Kriegskrüppel* (War Cripples), also known as *45% erwerbsfähig* (45% Work Capacity, referring to how pension benefits were determined), was first exhibited in June 1920 at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin. The Dresden Stadtmuseum purchased it but removed it from view in 1924 because it was so controversial and stored it in what was known as its “chamber of horrors.”⁷⁰ Subsequently the Nazis exhibited it as one of the prime examples of degenerate art, singled it out as an image for a propaganda poster condemning the “painted military sabotage” of the modernist avant-garde, and finally burned it.⁷¹ It is likely that Dix was familiar with postwar mass demonstrations of war victims and took these sights as material for this painting. Here four grotesque war cripples wearing medals parade down the street in front of a shoemaker’s shop led by a noncommissioned officer. As in the other three paintings, they are wearing primitive or fantastic prostheses except for the third man, who is a torso being pushed along in a wheelchair by the fourth. The wavy lines and blurred image of the second man mark him as a “shiverer.” This is a rare image in Weimar art of one of the psychically traumatized veterans whom many contemporary commentators noticed on the streets. In the background of the painting a hand points to Dix’s own profile with crosshairs over it, perhaps indicating that it was only by chance that he escaped a similar fate during his military service. The subtitle of the painting, *Vier geben noch keinen ganzen Menschen* (Four of These Don’t Add up to a Whole Man),⁷² makes explicit Dix’s passionate critique of the inhuman uses of technology. At the same time, the pomposity of the shattered figures and their absurd effort to maintain a military bearing and keep marching in step mark them as contemptible, ridiculous remnants of Prussian militarism. The machinery of war produced these human wrecks, but Dix’s depiction of their grotesque prostheses shows that peacetime technology is not able to put these men back together again.

“Prosthetic Economy Instead of Soviet Dictatorship”: Artists Critique the Medical-Industrial Complex

Shortly after the Kapp Putsch in 1920, the dadaist Raoul Hausmann published a brief, ironic prose piece in the journal *Die Aktion* entitled “Prothesenwirtschaft: Gedanken eines Kapp-Offiziers” (Prosthetic Economy: Thoughts of a Kapp Officer). Here the reactionary narrator blusters that Germany needs workers with prostheses because artificial limbs never tire and the proletarians could then work twenty-five hours per day. Accordingly, the officer’s solution for rebuilding Germany is “a prosthetic economy instead of a Soviet dictatorship,” referring to the failed German revolution of 1918–19.⁷³ This article was not mere dadaist silliness but rather a concrete satire that referred to the peppy discourse in rehabilitation circles about getting disabled veterans back to work as soon as possible. Along these lines, for example, an Institute for Psychotechnics in Berlin had advocated redesigning industrial machinery in order to fit prosthetic limbs better and had claimed that companies might actually become more efficient by integrating technologically enhanced workers’ bodies into their systems of production.⁷⁴

Hausmann was not the only Weimar artist to perceive the social trend toward functionalizing the bodies of workers in the service of industry and capitalist profits rather than transforming alienated working conditions so that workers would be treated like human beings rather than machines. Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1926), for example, employs a multilayered discourse of prosthesis extending from mythological references to futuristic technology. The inventor Rotwang, who is creating “machine men,” inhabits a realm of disability in his strange, ancient house. For an instant, the film shows his hunchbacked servant, a fairy-tale character, and Rotwang himself has a black prosthetic hand. When he introduces Fredersen, the ruler of Metropolis, to the robot he has created, he waves his prosthetic hand before Fredersen’s face and exclaims, “Isn’t it worth the loss of a hand to have created the man of the future, the machine-man?” This image recalls the Greek god Hephaistos, who was lame (and thus disabled) and, as the blacksmith of the gods, ruled the creative fire and made marvelous inventions. Rotwang’s artificial hand connects him to this realm of uncanny, premodern powers, on which he draws in order to create his robot, a total prosthesis embodying the most modern technology, which is to replace the living workers.⁷⁵ In other words, Rotwang is busy creating the “prosthetic economy” of Hausmann’s Kapp officer for Metropolis. That the robot is destroyed in the end by no means situates the film on the side of the

“Soviet dictatorship,” however, for its ultimate message is that of a rapprochement between capital and labor.

More radical artists sharply critiqued the tendencies in the Republic toward a “prosthetic economy.” If an artist such as Dix had used prosthetic imagery in his dadaist *Kriegskrüppel* painting to denounce militarism, other artists—particularly George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter, and Heinrich Hoerle—drew on prosthetic imagery in related ways that added further dimensions to their political statements. First, in dadaist images of artificial limbs, machine men, and marionettes, the prosthesis became a negative metaphor for the artificiality and hollowness of the bureaucratic state, for the weak foundations of democracy. Second, the Cologne progressivist Heinrich Hoerle was unique among Weimar artists in linking figures of disabled veterans and workers wearing prostheses in order to bring out the alienation of the worker in an industrial world of rigidly mechanized labor.

Around 1920 many German artists came into contact with the Italian metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. Combining this approach with Vladimir Tatlin’s “machine art,” dadaists such as Grosz and Schlichter immediately began to create their own paintings in this style, situating marionettes, puppets, and figures wearing prostheses in uncanny, often empty cityscapes. Examples include Grosz’s *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 1920), in which a faceless, handless torso is positioned on a cube in the middle of a city street; his *Diabolospieler* (Diabolo Player, 1920), an automaton with sticklike prostheses; and Schlichter’s *Dada-Dachatelier* (Dada Rooftop Studio, ca. 1920), which shows an uncanny collection of prosthesis-wearing marionettes, figures wearing gas masks, and the torso of a “glass man” with the inner organs exposed. While such paintings depict mechanical figures without any overtly political references, Grosz’s *Republikanische Automaten* (Republican Automats, 1920) situates this discourse of prosthesis firmly within the political arena of the Republic. Two faceless, prosthesis-wearing automatons with cylindrical, machinelike limbs appear here against a background of rectangular buildings and empty streets. The one on the right is a disabled veteran with amputated arms who is still a stalwart militarist, as his Iron Cross and the slogan “1 2 3 Hurra” emanating from his hollow head indicate. The clothes of the figure on the left mark him as middle class, and his peg leg and functional arm prosthesis mark him as a disabled veteran. With his metal claw, he holds the black, red, and gold flag of the Republic, which seems to be on very shaky footing, indeed, if such mechanical men spouting empty slogans constitute its foundation.

Grosz's brief metaphysical phase influenced many artists in the following years, particularly Heinrich Hoerle (1895–1936), who continued to paint prosthesis-wearing figures with references to this style as late as 1930. Preoccupied with the theme of the cripple, as were so many Weimar artists, Hoerle had first turned his attention to this subject in quite a different way. In 1920, he created a controversial collection of twelve lithographs entitled *Die Krüppelmappe* (The Cripple Portfolio), which can hardly be called dadaist but rather has strongly verist tendencies. Depicting veterans with various types of disabilities, the lithographs emphasize the isolation, suffering, and helplessness of these cripples. Men with no legs beg for a handout or drag themselves along the sidewalk while being stared at; a man with no hands, wearing an Iron Cross, simply stands with his eyes closed in despair; and a downcast man wearing two hooks tries to embrace a woman. Other images attempt to capture the cripple's emotional state in more surrealistic ways: helpless, impotent men see their missing limbs growing from flowerpots or dream of glorious erections. Contemporary reviewers compared the intensity of Hoerle's images to Goya's *Horrors of War*. They also understood these works as denunciations of the military-industrial complex, as did Hoerle's fellow artist, Franz Seiwert, in an article entitled "Krupp-Krüppel" (Krupp Cripples) in 1920. Here Seiwert described Hoerle's cripples with expressionistic pathos as monuments to the guilt of all those still producing armaments. He urged the public to face these "terrible sights" and be moved to oppose war.⁷⁶

Hoerle and his colleagues in the Cologne Group of Progressive Artists did not continue to paint in this verist style for long, however. Coming into contact with various left-radical communist groups, they soon developed a new style in which they sought to imbue strict geometrical constructions with an anonymous collective consciousness beyond all concern with individual psychology. Of all the artists discussed here, Hoerle is the only one who returned repeatedly to what has been termed "the synthesis of man and machine, commonly called a cripple," throughout the Weimar era.⁷⁷ Along with the sociopolitical implications of this figure, Hoerle seems simply to have been fascinated with the formal aspects of prostheses as junctures between machines and the body. He is the only artist of this time who experimented with drawing women as prosthesis wearers, as he did in *Schreitende mit Gelenk für eine Armprothese* (Striding Woman with Joint for an Arm Prosthesis, 1920).

If Hoerle's *Krüppelmappe* was a passionate moral protest against the brutality of war, his new constructivist style linked representations

of veterans and workers in order to show, in an often ironic way, the reintegration of their prosthetically rehabilitated bodies “into the post-war industrial infrastructure.”⁷⁸ Hoerle took this approach in numerous paintings, drawings, and linoleum cuts that feature strict geometric constructions, including *Krüppel, bettelnd*, also known as *Kriegskrüppel, bettelnd* ([War] Cripple, Begging, 1921); *Krüppel mit Frau* (Cripple with Woman, ca. 1921); *Fabrikarbeiter* (Factory Worker, 1922); *Frau mit Krüppel* (Woman with Cripple, ca. 1922); *Krüppel, gehend* (Cripple, Walking, 1923); *Arbeiter, 2. Zustand* (Worker, 2nd Version, 1923); *Der Europäer* (The European, 1923); *Kopfprothese* (Head Prosthesis, 1923); *Sitzender Krüppel raucht* (Seated Cripple Smoking, 1923); *Krüppel* (Cripple, ca. 1925); *Melancholie* (Melancholy, 1928, an unusual depiction of a woman with an amputated hand and a machine man); and *Feierabend* (Quitting Time, 1930).⁷⁹ One of these paintings has been called by various titles that underscore the technological project of transforming disabled veterans into efficient workers by means of prostheses: *Drei Invaliden*, *Arbeitsmänner*, *Maschinenmänner*, *Die Heimkehrer*, and *Prothesenträger* (Three Invalids, Workmen, Machine Men, The Returnees, and Prosthesis Wearers, 1930). Hoerle’s best-known painting on this subject is *Denkmal der unbekanntenen Prothesen* (Monument to the Unknown Prostheses, 1930) with its overtones of the “unknown soldier.” Here two machinelike male figures face each other wearing functional arm prostheses reminiscent of the work arms developed by the rehabilitation industry.⁸⁰ A small figure is seated in the background with holes in its amputated limbs where prostheses could be inserted. All the works mentioned here feature (war) cripples with removable or interchangeable body parts, artificial limbs similar to factory machinery, or even entire bodies that appear to be mechanisms. In this manner, Hoerle left behind the emotional concern with the individual expressed in his *Krüppelmappe* and sought to depict the complete alienation of the rehabilitated veteran, now the worker, as the “cripple” of the inhumanly mechanized industrial system, the “prosthetic economy.”

“Your Medicine Will Not Cure Humanity”: Disability in Weimar Literature

Disability was one of the most significant themes in Weimar visual art. There were few major representations of disability in literature during this period, however, for two main reasons. First, the conspicuous presence of disabled veterans and to a lesser extent of disabled workers

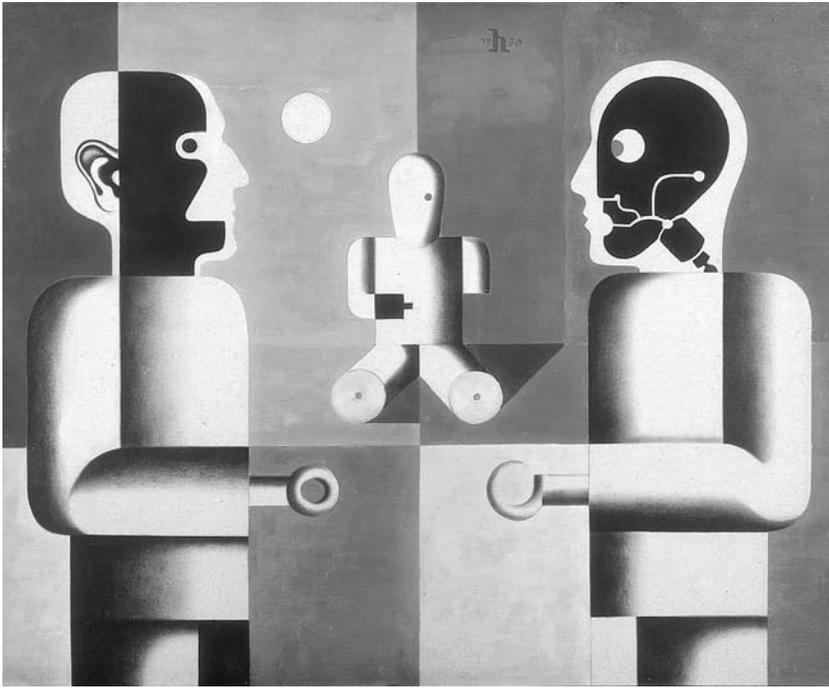


Fig. 7. Heinrich Hoerle, *Monument to the Unknown Prosthesis* (1930). Oil on cardboard, 66.5 × 82.5 cm. Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal. (© 2007 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

could be captured more strikingly in visual art. More generally speaking, until the rise of disability rights movements in the late twentieth century, disability has functioned as such a strongly marked category that it has almost always obliterated other dimensions of individuals from view in the cultural sphere. Thus, visual artists created major works that focused solely on a few very selective aspects of disability, but until fairly recently writers seldom conceived of disabled people as living the multifaceted lives necessary for depicting them as compelling main characters in literature.⁸¹ The one exception in this regard around the time of World War I and during the Weimar Republic is literature and films that portray the complexity of insanity or altered mental states, usually in an expressionistic, intense style.⁸² There are, however, a few important literary works from this period that deal significantly with disabled veterans, and as for visual art a central theme here is the place of these disabled men in postwar German society. While the works written in the closing months of the war call for all the oppressed—even including the disabled—to carry out a revolutionary transformation of

society, those written somewhat later no longer express a belief in this possibility, and so their disabled characters appear as resigned, embittered outcasts.

Leonhard Frank's collection of five novellas, *Der Mensch ist gut* (Man Is Good, 1918), depicts the effects of war throughout society, building to a climax in the last novella, "Die Kriegskrüppel" (The War Cripples). In contrast to the statement "Der Mensch ist ein Vieh" (man is an animal) by a more aggressively radical artist such as Grosz, Frank voiced with expressionistic pathos the hope that mankind would renounce the brutality of war and create a better world. The loosely connected sections of "Die Kriegskrüppel" are linked by the character of the military surgeon, a rare positive depiction of a physician in expressionist literature. In the first section, he is trying heroically to save wounded soldiers at the front, performing amputations in a makeshift operating room where a huge container full of limbs is emptied daily. The rescued cripples wonder how they can go on living with their damaged bodies, and the doctor hallucinates that he is amputating millions of limbs for all of Europe. The scene then shifts to a hospital train carrying the doctor and all the wounded men back to Germany. Their shattered bodies cause the men to question nationalistic ideology while the doctor intends to oppose the warmongers. He even imagines new words for the German national anthem: "The massive armies of cripples / Break into the light / Of the great, profound vision: / All men will be brothers."⁸³ The third section portrays disabled veterans being rejected for employment because they are viewed either as too weak or too disfigured for it. Having no alternative, "hundreds of thousands" become beggars. Recalling the mass demonstrations of disabled veterans that began toward the end of the war, the final section begins with a "cripples' march" of twenty thousand soldiers that swells to fifty thousand when workers, hospital patients, and spectators join it. The march is headed by a flatbed truck carrying a corpse, a soldier "without a face," men with amputations, and a man who is only a "torso," who is described as the "naked symbol of the war" (137). The Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht appears, and the narrator imagines disabled veterans and workers uniting in a revolutionary spirit of love and brotherhood. Frank thus depicts disabled veterans as passive sufferers who embody the pitiful consequences of war, but he also imagines them becoming active participants in the revolutionary struggle for love and freedom. In this ecstatic expressionist vision, nationalism is overcome, and cripples, moving from the darkness to the light, become part of humanity.

Writing in 1931, Erich Maria Remarque portrayed a similar demonstration but came to very different conclusions in his novel *Der Weg*

zurück (The Way Back). This is a sentimental story of the Lost Generation of young veterans who are disillusioned with politics and alienated from everyday life after returning from service at the front. At one point, the main characters see a demonstration of disabled veterans taking place during the period of inflation.⁸⁴ Carrying banners with slogans such as “Where is the thanks of the fatherland?” and “The war cripples are starving,” the participants appear sequentially in groups: one-armed men, blind men led by guide dogs (“with the mute plea that those who can still see should really look”), one-eyed men, those with facial wounds, the long rows of men with amputated legs, the shiverers, and those who can still walk pushing men in wheelchairs and one “torso” on a handcart. In contrast to Frank’s invocations of brotherhood, Remarque’s narrator—in this book written after the economic crisis was in full swing—imagines that these men will remain nothing but victims, brushed aside by politicians with a few glib speeches.

This move from optimism to pessimism is illustrated especially strikingly by the contrasts between two of Ernst Toller’s plays. Internationally the best-known dramatist of this period, Toller came from a middle-class family and volunteered for service at the front in 1915. After thirteen months at Verdun, he suffered a nervous and physical breakdown, was hospitalized, and then began to study in Munich, write plays, and become involved with the growing revolutionary movement of workers and soldiers. Believing that only insanity would cause someone from such a middle-class background to ally himself with working people, his worried mother had him committed for a few days in 1918 to the Munich university psychiatric clinic, where the famous professor Emil Kraepelin examined him. In his autobiography, Toller wrote sympathetically about the other patients he met and critically about the psychiatrist, stating that the former were harmless sick people locked up by the latter, whom he described as a truly dangerous advocate of nationalism as a cure for all ills.⁸⁵ Toller’s extensive experiences at the front, along with his brief, involuntary stay in the mental institution, gave him firsthand exposure to disabled people and medical professionals, which he worked into material for his plays.

Toller began to write *Die Wandlung: Das Ringen eines Menschen* (The Transformation: The Struggle of a Human Being) in 1917, and it premiered in Berlin on September 30, 1919. In January of 1918, however, he had already distributed the scenes about war cripples on leaflets to striking munitions workers in Munich. One of the best-known expressionist dramas, this play written in free verse traces the transformation of Friedrich—who is loosely modeled on Toller himself—from an enthusiastic army volunteer and nationalistic patriot to a revolutionary

advocate of brotherhood. Throughout the play, confrontation with disability is an essential impetus to Friedrich's transformation. First, a brief scene at the front shows wounded, insane soldiers who are beginning to question why they had to sacrifice their health while Friedrich still tries to defend war for the fatherland. The sixth scene presents two opposing views of disability. Here there appears an elegant doctor dressed in black whose head is a skull with glowing eyes. He displays to his medical students—one of whom has Friedrich's face—"seven naked cripples" who are wearing prostheses and whose faces all look alike. The doctor boasts that as fast as the armaments industry is creating new patients, the medical system is transforming them into machines that are again useful to the state. In this spirit, he declaims, "We are armored against all horrors. / We could call ourselves the positive branch; / The negative branch is the armaments industry."⁸⁶ The doctor's functionalist interpretation of these men's bodies is undercut when other cripples begin to speak from their beds. A blind man asks if it is already night, a man with no arms pleads for help relieving himself, and a paralyzed man begs for death. Rejecting all consolation, these men ask why no one resisted the war that brought them such misery. They thus refuse to be reintegrated again into the well-oiled military-industrial machine that the doctor is charged with maintaining. When the play was performed, nationalist circles were outraged at this bitter medical satire, taking it as mocking war victims, whom they preferred to view as heroes.⁸⁷

With his figure of the sinister physician, Toller tapped perceptively into a fundamental shift in the social role of doctors and the social function of medicine. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, physicians were primarily family doctors for the middle and upper classes, while the lower classes generally took care of themselves as best they could with home remedies. When mass insurance programs were established in the latter part of the century, however, the role of doctors changed significantly. Suddenly they were charged with speedily treating huge numbers of patients, acting as gatekeepers for the pension system, and determining fitness for military service. In short, the *Hausarzt* (family doctor) became a *Halbgott* (demigod or god in a white coat).⁸⁸ These social changes were reflected in cultural representations. With the notable exception of the unfeeling physician who torments the soldier Woyzeck in Georg Büchner's play (written in 1836–37 and published 1877), doctors generally appear as fatherly, kind figures in nineteenth-century German literature. In expressionist literature, however, the physician becomes a much more negative type, depicted as an authoritarian bureaucrat who is devoid of human empathy and even aggressively hostile toward his wounded or disabled patients.⁸⁹ Toller

returned to such a figure one more time in his play *Hoppla, wir leben!* (*Hoppla, Such Is Life!* 1927). Here a social Darwinist psychiatrist rants using eugenic terminology that revolutionaries who want to improve life for the masses should be “sterilized and eradicated.”⁹⁰ Consequently, with his evil doctor characters Toller joined all those Weimar writers and artists who portrayed medicine and the rehabilitation system as serving militaristic, nationalistic, and even racist interests.

After the hospital scene, another confrontation with disability provokes Friedrich’s final transformation. He now appears as a sculptor trying unsuccessfully to create a statue of a nude man, which is described as a muscular, brutal symbol of the victorious fatherland. Suddenly he hears an organ grinder, and a war-disabled, syphilitic woman enters with her traumatized, insane husband, Friedrich’s former comrade. Upon seeing the disabled couple and learning from the woman that only the wealthy benefit from the war, Friedrich destroys his monumental, heroic statue. This action recalls Beckmann’s lithograph, *Nachhauseweg*, for Friedrich realizes that a representation of the perfect body can no longer stand for the fatherland in view of the overwhelming misery caused by the war. After this decisive turning point, Friedrich casts aside his bourgeois past. In a final exchange with the doctor, he proclaims, “Your medicine will not cure humanity” (281) and calls instead with expressionist intensity for universal brotherhood. Rejecting the prosthetic economy of the doctor’s technocratic cures, Friedrich allies himself with the revolution of the poor and the oppressed.

Disability is one of several important themes in *Die Wandlung*, but in *Hinkemann* (translated as *Brokenbrow*, 1921–22) Toller made a disabled veteran the main character and created the most substantial literary depiction of disability penned in the Weimar era. Written while Toller was in prison after the failed revolution of 1918–19, this tragedy mourns dashed hopes for radical social change and voices the hopelessness of a veteran stigmatized because of his disability. In contrast to visual art, literature can of course more easily depict invisible or hidden conditions, which Toller did here by portraying Hinkemann as castrated by a war injury. Bringing this further dimension to Weimar representations of disability, the play revolves around the ways in which Hinkemann, his wife, and his former friends react to this type of demasculinization, exploring what social positions were open to such a man in German society.

Many men in fact suffered from such wounds, and one historian has uncovered an article from 1934 that deals with 310 cases of castrated veterans based on patients’ records.⁹¹ The experiences of these men were written down because they were asking to be classified as disabled

and thus entitled to pensions. They told, for example, of being denied employment because of feminizing hormonal changes that made them blush inappropriately or caused their voices to rise. In doctors' notes, these patients also reported that when their condition became known some people laughed at them, called them names such as *Karlchen ohne* (Carlie without), and made fun of them for being childless. In short, as one farmer lamented, they were viewed as "despised cripples." Some veterans agreed that their wives should have children by other men so they would not be mocked, while one woman wrote a letter demonstrating her touchingly naive belief in the omnipotence of prosthetic medicine, pleading, "Wouldn't it be better, esteemed welfare office, since you give out so many spare parts, if you could also provide a spare part for my husband? He doesn't even dare to go out in public any more. . . . Isn't this really hurtful for someone who fought for his fatherland? . . . Please, I want a child so very much" (76). Whereas the rehabilitation system could attempt to remasculinize veterans with some other types of disabilities, such as amputations, by outfitting them with prostheses and putting them back to work, the castrated veterans presented an insuperable challenge to traditional concepts of masculinity in the postwar situation, and this is precisely the theme of Toller's tragedy.

In his autobiography, Toller described the guiding thought behind his play as follows: "How would someone look at life who has been castrated in the war? Aren't healthy people really the blind ones?"⁹² This statement speaks on several levels simultaneously that indicate why the play is such a fascinating, contradictory cultural representation of disability. First, Toller was making a unique, genuine effort to write from the perspective of a veteran disabled in this way and to validate his views of life. The metaphor of "healthy" people as "blind," however, points to a pervasive use of disability as negative metaphor throughout the play. This technique undermines the sympathy created for Hinkemann since it serves to assign disability to a realm of grotesqueness that Toller employs for political allegory.

Living in a working-class milieu, Hinkemann is worried about whether his wife still loves him and afraid that others will find out he is a cripple and laugh at him. His wife finally breaks down and tells his best friend how ashamed she is that Hinkemann is "not a man" any longer. She sleeps with the friend and becomes pregnant. Meanwhile, wanting to provide for his wife and finding no other decent-paying job, Hinkemann agrees to perform in a freak show at a fair, biting off the heads of live rats. The barker allegorizes his performance as follows: "*The German hero! The representative of German culture! The German*

strong man! *The favorite of all the elegant women!*”⁹³ His wife and friend happen to pass by and overhear this, and the friend immediately laughs at the sham, exclaiming, “So that’s what the German hero looks like! Somebody without. . . A eunuch. . . Hahahahaha! So that’s what the German defender of the homeland looked like!” (20). After this scene, Hinkemann talks with his friends at a pub about what will happen to all the war cripples, and in a sharply ironic exchange they cheerfully assure him that society will provide rehabilitation and loving care for these men. In a hallucination similar to Dix’s *Kriegskrüppel*, Hinkemann sees amputees with barrel organs who are ready and willing to march off to war again. Finally, his remorseful wife commits suicide, leaving him alone to describe himself as “colossal and ridiculous”—a monstrous figure.

Throughout the play, Hinkemann tells how becoming a cripple has made him see the world in a different way. He calls the castrating gunshot a “fruit from the tree of knowledge” that opened his eyes to all the pointless suffering around him (52). In tones echoing those of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, he observes how people are caught up in a vicious circle of brutality and do not want to transform themselves, even though they could be so much happier. In such passages, Hinkemann is the figure of identification in the play whose disability has given him deeper insights into reality in a manner similar to the disabled veteran Dix painted with his own features in his *Großstadt*. On another level, however, Hinkemann’s disability stands for the castrated, demasculinized German nation. Consequently, this character also functions as a grotesque, provocative allegory of defeated Germany and the impotence of the front generation, as indicated by the play’s original title, *Der deutsche Hinkemann* (The German Hinkemann).

Nationalistic circles quickly zeroed in on this meaning of disability in Toller’s play. Because of his leadership in the Munich Soviet Republic and subsequent imprisonment, his Jewishness, and his provocative works, he had become known as the most controversial author of the early Weimar Republic. The scandals involving his plays climaxed at performances of *Hinkemann* in 1923 and 1924 in Leipzig, Dresden, Vienna, and Berlin, where hostile nationalists, national socialists, and volkish students disrupted performances and even provoked street fights. These anti-Bolshevist, anti-Semitic groups attacked “Hinkemann Toller” for allegedly insulting war victims by putting a castrated veteran onstage for the public to see. The fracas at the Dresden Staatstheater even led to a debate in the Saxon parliament on January 24, 1924. One right-wing representative claimed that the play “mocks Christianity and

the German people, ridicules our wounded war heroes, and is the worst filth imaginable.” This politician moralized that “the theater is not a warehouse where physical or mental eunuchs, toilet-bowl artists, or criminals can celebrate their orgies—without being punished.”⁹⁴ By contrast, in a review of the Berlin production of *Hinkemann* on April 15, 1924, Joseph Roth praised the play as “the beginning of a new literature” about the proletariat. Noting that Hinkemann was castrated “on the field of dubious honor, of ‘male’ honor,” he pointed out that it was precisely this ironic view of “German heroism” and “German manliness” that the nationalists could not abide (154). Nationalists wanted disabilities caused by war to remain hidden outside the public sphere, but a leftist such as Toller insisted on showing the terrible aspects of war disabilities as provocatively as possible. In this respect, the scandal over *Hinkemann* is an early instance of a culture war about who would set the terms for interpreting the meaning of disability for the German nation.

Disabled Civilians, Eugenics, and Rehabilitation Psychology

While the best-known representations of disability in Weimar art and literature are those of disabled veterans and workers, various types of discourses about other groups of disabled people were also central to cultural, social, medical, economic, and political controversies during this period. The discourse of rehabilitation advocated helping disabled people, including crippled children, become self-supporting, but it was also based on problematic assumptions about abnormal psychology and the need for social control. Furthermore, the discourse of eugenics, known in Germany as racial hygiene, expanded exponentially during the Weimar period.⁹⁵ Coined in 1881 by the British naturalist and mathematician Francis Galton, the term *eugenics* was defined by a leading U.S. advocate, Charles B. Davenport, as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding.”⁹⁶ Accordingly, eugenicists stressed both “positive” approaches (encouraging “superior” people to have more children) and “negative” approaches (advocating sterilization to prevent the “inferior” from reproducing). The eugenicists hardly supported outright euthanasia, for they generally believed that sterilizing the “unfit” was the best way to achieve their goals.⁹⁷

Having developed within the larger context of social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century, eugenics became a widespread discourse and practice in many countries, including the United States and Great Britain. In particular, the majority of U.S. states passed involuntary ster-

ilization laws that were applied mostly to patients in mental institutions and to prison inmates.⁹⁸ In Germany after the end of World War I, however, shocked by the large numbers of healthy soldiers who had been killed or disabled and by the socioeconomic crisis, voices from across much of the political spectrum, from conservatives to social democrats, began to advocate eugenic policies more strongly.⁹⁹ In what one historian has termed a “genetic allegory of the stab-in-the-back legend,” these circles argued that while healthy, productive Germans had died on the battlefield, the unfit and unproductive had survived and procreated at home, frequently living off the meager resources of the state.¹⁰⁰

Any analysis of disability in Weimar culture and society must deal with how disabled people were targeted by the racial hygienists and those moving in their orbit in the cultural sphere. No single study can accomplish this task, but it is possible at least to explicate some of the most significant tendencies in this area. In the following sections, I describe briefly who disabled civilians were and discuss how rehabilitation theories demonstrated supportive attitudes but also sometimes a eugenic mind-set. Next I show how circles on the right extended their attacks on disabled people they viewed as degenerate into the realm of culture by declaring much of the avant-garde art discussed here to be degenerate also. This pervasive discourse about degeneracy paved the way for Nazi cultural policies that attacked modern art by comparing it to artworks created by people who were mentally ill. As was the case for debates about disabled veterans, many of the controversies about other groups of disabled people also focused on their proper place in German society, the meaning of their bodies for the German nation, and how they were to be represented in culture.

Although disabled veterans had many types of impairments, the civilian disabled population was even more heterogeneous. People of both sexes and all ages were affected by a much greater variety of physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental impairments, including conditions that were hereditary or congenital. Large numbers of civilians—especially children—had also become disabled as a result of wartime conditions, above all due to the malnourishment and poor hygiene that caused an explosion in diseases such as rickets and (spinal) tuberculosis. As one welfare group wrote in 1926, “Never before have our wards been so crowded with dying tubercular children. Never before have we seen so many extreme manifestations of bone deformities.”¹⁰¹ Since disability is always a fluid rather than a sharply delineated category, it is useful to summarize briefly the most factually comprehensive effort to characterize the disabled population during the Weimar period. This was the national government survey of disabled people undertaken in

1925–26, which is to date the only survey of its kind ever carried out in Germany. Published by the Statistisches Reichsamts and entitled *Die Gebrechlichen im Deutschen Reich nach der Zählung von 1925–26* (The Infirm in the German Reich according to the Survey of 1925–26), the survey defined the “infirm” as encompassing the blind, deaf and dumb (those who were born deaf or lost hearing before age seven), deaf (those who lost hearing after age seven), physically infirm (divided into severely and slightly infirm), and mentally infirm (including the mentally ill, epileptic, and hereditarily or congenitally feebleminded and noting that 39.5 percent were born with their condition).¹⁰² The purpose of the survey was to collect useful facts for providing treatment and welfare benefits. It included questions about medical condition, age, residence, living conditions and marital status, income and occupation, and education.

The survey’s organizers admitted that there were significant methodological problems with their data collection, including undercounting, misinterpretation of questions, and the reluctance of many respondents to provide information about income and employment due to fear of losing benefits. Keeping these limitations in mind, however, the survey provides a fascinating glimpse into some central aspects of disabled people’s lives at this time. These statistics tell us nothing about subjective experiences of acceptance or rejection. Nevertheless, the numbers still indicate something about the extent to which various groups of disabled people had opportunities to live in their communities and to fulfill age-appropriate social roles. Accordingly, the survey’s findings about residence and marital status, education, and employment are especially significant. In view of what was to come, residence is important because it was above all placement in institutions that would later make many disabled people vulnerable to Nazi “euthanasia.” Education is significant as preparation for work, and employment is significant both because of the stress put on it by the rehabilitation experts and because ability to work would later be a way of escaping Nazi eugenic policies to some extent.

For those with sensory and physical disabilities, residence in an institution was connected in most cases with rehabilitation and education, and only small numbers of people from these groups were permanently institutionalized. Although 17.5 percent of blind people lived in institutions, the vast majority were children and young people being educated in schools for the blind. Blind people living in their own households, with relatives, or in unreported circumstances accounted for another 80.4 percent. A total of 59 percent of young deaf and dumb people aged seven to fifteen were being educated in institutions,

whereas very few older people from this group were institutionalized. Of the severely physically disabled, about 4.5 percent of males and 9.2 percent of females resided in a cripples' home or other institution such as an old age home. Of those aged fifteen to twenty, about 80 percent lived with parents or other relatives, while 13 percent of boys and 7.9 percent of girls were in cripples' homes where they were receiving treatment and vocational training. Marital status differed greatly among this group by gender. Among men, 63 percent were married and 31.7 percent were single, whereas these numbers were reversed among severely physically disabled women, with 21.3 percent being married and 60.4 percent single. The survey explained this by stating that women were frequently willing to care for a disabled husband, whereas it was only "natural" that few men would marry a disabled woman. Institutionalization was highest among the "mentally infirm" with about 63.3 percent of this group living in state hospitals and nursing homes (Heil- und Pflgeanstalten), institutions for epileptics or the feebleminded, or other types of institutions. In terms of absolute numbers, other sources indicate a rise in institutionalization over the course of the Weimar period. Thus, there were 185,397 psychiatric patients in 1924 and over 300,000 in 1929,¹⁰³ and cripples' homes had expanded their number of beds from 3,400 in 1906 to 12,500 in 1931.¹⁰⁴ In a related area, the number of pupils in Hilfsschulen (special schools for the "educable feebleminded") increased from 43,000 in 1914 to 72,000 in 1928 (173). A complex mixture of humanitarian and disciplinary factors influenced these developments. After the Great Depression began, however, racial hygienists cited such numbers as disturbing illustrations of the economic overextension of the Weimar welfare state and called for drastic solutions to curtail spending on such "degenerates."

The questions about education and training elicited information that reveals significant efforts to provide at least some schooling to those with sensory and physical disabilities, while these questions were not even asked about the mentally infirm. Of blind people, only 1.7 percent of men and 2.3 percent of women had no formal school education while about 70 percent had only finished elementary school (Volksschule). Of the deaf and dumb, about 8 percent had received no formal schooling, and the majority were educated in an institution. Of the severely physically disabled, 1.4 percent of men and 3.4 percent of women had no formal schooling while 84.8 percent of men and 86 percent of women had only finished elementary school. Almost all of those with slight physical disabilities attended regular schools.

In 1925, for the German population as a whole, 68 percent of men and 35.6 percent of women were employed outside the home. Among

blind people, however, 38 percent of men and 13.5 percent of women were employed, most frequently in the stereotypical occupations of basket maker and brush maker. Of the deaf and dumb, 63.8 percent of men and 29.8 percent of women worked, the majority in factories and the trades. Of the severely physically disabled, 64 percent of men were employed, most frequently as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, basket makers, mechanics, peddlers, and so forth, while 15 percent of women worked, especially in occupations having to do with sewing, knitting, and so forth. Of the mentally infirm, only about 13.1 percent of men and 3.5 percent of women worked, generally performing simple farm tasks or manual labor. This fact made it all the easier for racial hygienists to write these people off as “ballast existences” who were supposedly draining the nation’s resources and to advocate their elimination.

When historians have dealt with disabled civilians during this era, they have generally focused on the theory and practice of medicine, rehabilitation, and special education; on institutions such as cripples’ homes and mental hospitals; and on the history of racial hygiene. This large body of research is essential to understanding many aspects of disabled people’s lives and to exploring the origins of Nazi eugenic policies. What the survey of 1925–26 indicates, however, is that historical research focusing on institutionalized disabled people leaves the lives of many others outside its purview. As can be seen from these statistics, the vast majority of people with sensory and physical disabilities did not live in institutions, and a significant number of the mentally disabled (about one-third) lived in their own communities. The group of physically disabled children and young people is a case in point. Since the Prussian Law on Cripples’ Welfare of 1920 only applied to children from poor families, it was generally these children who were institutionalized in state cripples’ homes.¹⁰⁵ Almost nothing is known about the lives of disabled people who lived outside institutions, those from families with the means and the will to care for children at home and with the persistence to insist that their children attend regular schools and receive vocational training or higher education. Accordingly, the results of the survey indicate the relevance of social class in shaping the diverging experiences of large groups of disabled people and in veiling many of their lives from the historian.

Keeping these limitations on knowledge in mind, much may still be said about how the theory and practice of rehabilitation during this period both supported and marginalized particular groups of people with disabilities. The earlier discussion of disabled veterans gains further dimensions by linking it to how some influential rehabilitation

experts viewed the disabled children under their care in institutions. Once again the orthopedist Konrad Biesalski and his colleagues at the Oskar-Helene Home in Berlin may serve as examples. On the one hand, their institution was a model for its time that provided not only medical and rehabilitation facilities but also schooling, opportunities for play and recreation, and time outdoors in the sun and fresh air to the young patients. Guided in many ways by enlightened principles, these experts wanted to provide the comprehensive treatment and vocational training that would enable their charges to become self-supporting members of society, independent citizens rather than charity recipients.

In spite of this goal of social integration, Biesalski and his colleague Hans Würtz (1875–1958), the education director at the Oskar-Helene Home, were influenced by physiognomic theories and thus believed that the deformed bodies of cripples necessarily shaped the development of their emotional makeup. Biesalski claimed, for example, that a soldier who had lost a leg, a worker whose hand had been torn away by a machine, or a child who suddenly became paralyzed were not only physically impaired but also in danger of acquiring negative emotional qualities, of becoming “withdrawn, suspicious, envious, easily offended, bitter, and arrogant.”¹⁰⁶ In turn, they argued that disabled people—particularly the young—should be treated and educated in institutions rather than remaining at home or attending regular schools. They asserted that the expertise of physicians (particularly orthopedists) and educators like themselves was necessary in order to straighten both the bodies of cripples and their sick souls, to instill in them the iron will to overcome their impairments, and to make them into productive workers. Würtz was especially prolific in writing about what he termed “cripples’ souls,” as the titles of some of his books attest: *Der Wille siegt* (The Will Conquers All, 1915); *Sieghafte Lebenskämpfer* (Victors in the Struggle for Life, 1919); *Das Seelenleben des Krüppels* (The Soul Life of the Cripple, 1921); and, last but not least, *Zerbrecht die Krücken: Krüppelprobleme der Menschheit—Schicksalsstiefkinder aller Zeiten und Völker in Wort und Bild* (Break the Crutches: The Problems of Cripples for Humanity—Stepchildren of Fate from All Times and Peoples in Words and Pictures, 1932). This last book is an obsessive—though useful—compilation of lists of cripples in history and depictions of cripples in art, literature, and proverbs. Proceeding from undoubtedly humanitarian intentions, Würtz’s “cripple pedagogy” ultimately provided a rationale for segregating disabled people and contributed to the further stigmatization of people with orthopedic impairments.¹⁰⁷

The most problematic aspect of theories such as those of Biesalski



Fig. 8. Children with spinal tuberculosis enjoying the fresh air at the Oskar-Helene Home in Berlin. (From Konrad Biesalski, *Grundriss der Krüppelfürsorge* [Leipzig: Voss, 1926], 13. Courtesy of the Library of the University of Kentucky.)

and Würtz was the overbearing emphasis they placed on work in connection with their construction of an abnormal psychology of disabled people. Partly to legitimate their own field, these experts insisted that most disabled people could learn or relearn to work—a guiding principle that of course had many positive, empowering aspects. They applied this principle in an extremely inflexible manner, however, viewing those who would not work as having weak wills or other negative psychological characteristics. Furthermore, the result of this approach for those who truly could not work or care for themselves—the most severely physically disabled people and the majority of those with mental illnesses or cognitive disabilities—was the conclusion that they should be consigned to the margins of society and frequently to institutions. Already during the period of astronomical inflation in the early Weimar years, voices had been raised calling for money to be spent only on rehabilitating those cripples who could be trained to work, and these proposals became more widespread after the economic crisis began in 1929.¹⁰⁸ In 1932, in *Zerbrecht die Krücken*, for example, Würtz declared that “modern orthopedics separates the curable cripple from the incur-

able invalid: modern cripple pedagogy separates the morally healthy cripple who is open to becoming autonomous from the feeble-minded, who remain morally immature and dependent.”¹⁰⁹

Although Biesalski and Würtz did not explicitly use the term *degenerate*, their positing of an abnormal “cripple soul” and their methodology of ranking disabled people as acceptable or inferior according to their tractability and work capacity participated in the eugenic discourse of degeneracy that was so pervasive at the time. Psychiatrists and government officials frequently applied similar ideas to veterans with mental problems caused by the war—those who might be described today as affected by post-traumatic stress disorder.¹¹⁰ Over the course of the Weimar period, it became more difficult for such veterans—called “war neurotics” or “pension psychotics”—to receive financial compensation for war-related psychological suffering. The psychiatrists who were gatekeepers to the pension system increasingly opposed such compensation, often categorizing these men as constitutionally deficient and prescribing hard work as the only cure for their maladies. Furthermore, the accusations of malingering frequently directed against these men mirrored the rehabilitation experts’ view of the inferior “cripple soul” as work shy. These psychiatric casualties were often linked with the revolutionaries of 1918–19 in that both groups were condemned as psychopathic and unpatriotic.¹¹¹ In this manner, the right-wing discourse of degeneracy combined attacks on disabled people (especially the mentally ill), Marxists, and Jews as threats to the racial makeup and political stability of the German nation.

Affronts to the Healthy Eye: The Aesthetic Discourse of Degeneracy

With their methods for treating disabled children and adults, the rehabilitation experts rigidly upheld the social expectation that citizens should engage in productive work, thus fueling debates over what should be done with “unproductive” groups of people. In such controversies, social norms were frequently intertwined in complex ways with aesthetic norms that extolled the healthy and beautiful while condemning the sick, disabled, and ugly. These pervasive discourses about disability are evident in clashes over the actual presence of disabled people in public, cultural representations of disability, and the labeling of modern art as degenerate. With regard to the perceptions of the public, on the one hand there were certainly many who supported efforts to help dis-

abled people, but many also did not want to be confronted directly with such “unfortunates” in daily life. The frequent citizens’ protests against plans to locate cripples’ homes in their proximity are revealing instances of this mentality. Of course, economic considerations and fears of decreased property values were an important factor, but aesthetic considerations also played a significant role. For example, an article published in the *Nationalzeitung* on May 24, 1910, assailed a proposal to build such an institution on the North Sea island of Norderney as follows: “Norderney is a world-class spa with a rather small beach. Should droves of unhappy crippled children be led around and allowed to swim there among the elegant, cheerful visitors to the spa? People would constantly be looking at these children with curiosity, pity, or disgust. Is that good for the poor cripples? And is it good for those who want to refresh themselves for a few weeks and recover from their responsibilities and from their work in pleasant surroundings at the seaside!”¹¹² Similarly, in 1912 plans to build an institution in Wiesbaden were canceled after residents protested that they could not be expected to put up with the sight of “Siamese twins” and children with “water on the brain” in their beautiful parks (222). Furthermore, in Berlin well-to-do residents living near the Oskar-Helene Home prevailed upon its directors to omit the word *Krüppelheim* (cripples’ home) from its official name and demanded reassurances that the sight of the young patients would not be “repulsive” (251). If curiosity, exemplified in the freak show, was one extreme reaction to bodily deviation from the norm, such protests exemplified its opposite. Feeling disgust and aversion, these citizens, who had no doubts about their own health and normality, wanted to banish visibly disabled people from their sight. It was not a very big step from such hostility toward disabled people in daily life to eugenic thinking that wanted to eliminate them altogether.

Whether consciously or not, such efforts to remove disabled people from the public sphere of respectable citizens coincided with the broader discourse about degeneracy that had received its quintessential statement in Max Nordau’s *Entartung* (Degeneration, 1892–93). It is an irony of history that with this book, Nordau—a physician, writer, son of a rabbi, and later a leading Zionist—provided the method of using medical concepts to attack modern literature that the national socialists were to employ in their attacks on aesthetic modernism. Nordau characterized degeneracy as deviance from the aesthetic and social norms and sensibilities of the educated middle classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*). For him, degeneracy in culture was shown by qualities such as dissonance, artificiality, agitation, strangeness, obscurity, excessive sensuality, and

irrationality; while its opposite, health, was indicated by harmony, naturalness, calm, familiarity, clarity, self-control, and rationality. Furthermore, he made the fatal leap from characterizing cultural trends as degenerate to labeling certain people as degenerate. These were disabled people who manifested anatomical deformations he termed “stigmata” but also modern artists, whom he described as “spiritual eunuchs, cripples, vermin.”¹¹³ Accordingly, he wrote, “The normal person with a clear mind, logical thinking, sober judgment, and a strong will concedes at the most, out of scornful pity, the shelter of the hospital, the insane asylum, or the prison to the helpless degenerate” (45). Influenced by social Darwinism, Nordau thus argued that the healthy should forcibly expel the degenerate, who were not only inferior but also harmful to respectable society.¹¹⁴

Voices across much of the political spectrum proposed various types of eugenic measures to achieve this goal of eliminating the degenerate during the Weimar Republic. It was only right-wing nationalists, however, who linked discourses about disability and degeneracy with cultural criticism of modern art. Through comparisons with the appearance of visibly disabled people, these ideologues declared much of modern art to be degenerate, also, because of its characteristic deviations from “nature.” Of course, since about 1890 there had been many volkish nationalists who typically attacked modernism as “un-German.” But the Militant League for German Culture (Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur), founded by Alfred Rosenberg in 1928, was the first organization to channel these older nationalist views in an explicitly national socialist direction. Its adherents employed fascist vocabulary to label modern art as degenerate, subhuman, subversively Jewish, or culturally Bolshevik.

The publication emanating from these circles that had the most fatal consequences was Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race, 1928). Schultze-Naumburg was a well-known nationalist architect whose traditional aesthetic, founded on an environmentalist culture of the homeland, was displaced increasingly by the internationalism of the Bauhaus school after 1918. This declining professional success may have provoked him to denounce the coldness of the Bauhaus as un-German and claim that aesthetics had a racial basis, as he did in a 1926 altercation with the leading Bauhaus architect, Walter Gropius.¹¹⁵ Two years later, in *Kunst und Rasse*, Schultze-Naumburg extended this criticism to much of modern art, including expressionist and verist works, which he defamed as degenerate by comparing them to photographs of disabled people.

Schultze-Naumburg left no doubts about his revulsion toward the

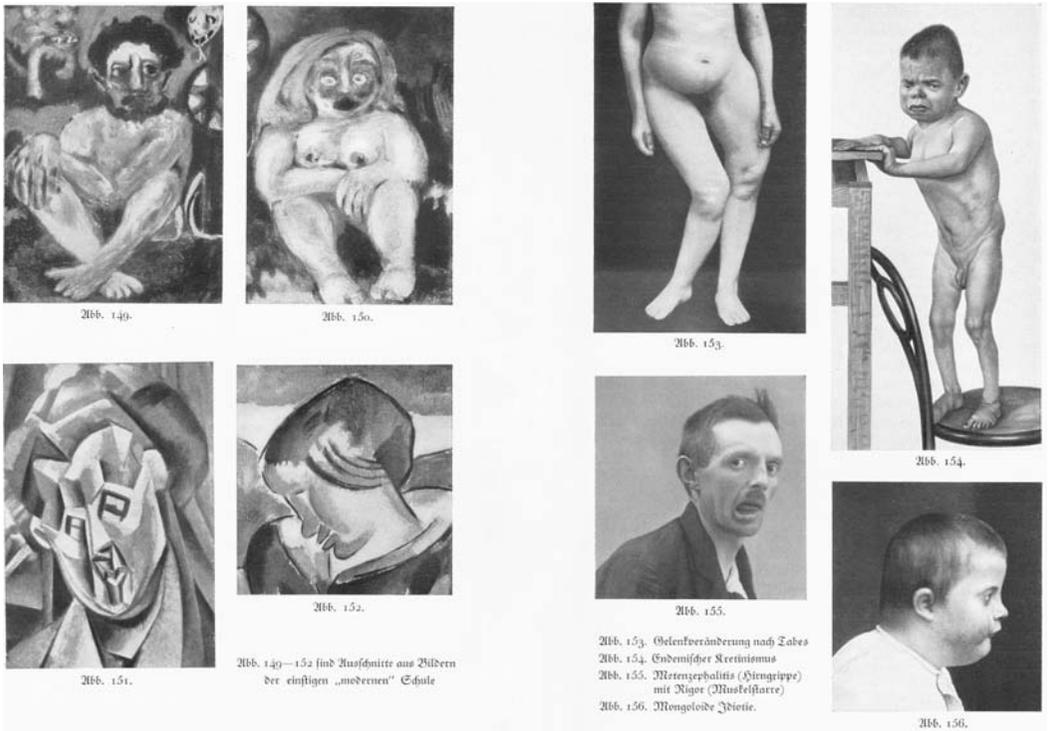


Fig. 9. Juxtaposition of modern art with photographs of disabled people. (From Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse* [Munich: Lehmann, 1928], 98–99. Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.)

people shown in these photographs, which he acquired from Dr. Wilhelm Weygandt, the director of the Friedrichsberg state mental hospital and head psychiatrist at the university clinic in Hamburg. Schultze-Naumburg’s display of these medical photographs blotted out the individuality of these patients and reduced them to objects used for a purpose counter to their real interests. The patients are identified by their medical diagnoses, including paralysis, Mongoloid idiocy, paralysis of eye muscles, microcephaly, idiocy, elephantiasis, rickets, anencephaly, acromegaly of hands and lower face, severe harelip, chondrodystrophy, obesity, cretinism, nervous disorder of late-stage syphilis, and encephalitis. Significantly, not all of these conditions are hereditary or mental illnesses. Rather, the photographs Schultze-Naumburg selected are of people whose appearance deviated greatly from his aesthetic ideal of the “healthy, Nordic man.”¹¹⁶ Writing that it was only in the “deepest

depths of human misery and human scum,” in the “idiot asylums, psychiatric clinics, cripples’ homes, lepers’ colonies, and hideouts of the most debased” that such “material” might be seen, he praised charitable welfare services for endeavoring to keep such “creatures” out of “public view.”¹¹⁷ In the preface to the second edition of his book (1934), along with praising the national socialists for expelling Jews from influential positions, he welcomed their involuntary sterilization law, stating, “The eradication of the inferior is no longer an ideology out of touch with life, but rather it has been anchored in legislation and thus in reality. After the timid attempts we have observed in individual states in North America, Germany has become the first country to organize its entire state apparatus around this new volkish principle.”¹¹⁸ This train of thought demonstrates especially clearly how an aestheticization of health served to stigmatize many disabled or ill people and abet forcible efforts to eliminate them from the body politic.

Schultze-Naumburg juxtaposed these photographs to works by both German and foreign avant-garde artists, including, though he did not name them, Picasso, Kokoschka, Modigliani, Hofer, Nolde, and Schmidt-Rottluff. Using racial terms, he assailed Weimar art for rarely portraying “Nordic man” and for preferring “exotic, primitive” types that showed all the signs of degeneracy found among the “ill and the physically deformed.” In contrast to the purity of art in antiquity and the early Renaissance, which “enriches us and makes us happy,” he attacked Weimar artists for creating a “hell of the subhuman.”¹¹⁹ Accordingly, he labeled these avant-garde art works degenerate. This perspective resonated among broad sectors of the public, whose members had little understanding of modernistic distortions in art and preferred more realistic images.¹²⁰ It also resonated among those who believed art should glorify national ideals rather than subverting them as Beckmann, Dix, Grosz, Hoerle and others had done with their depictions of disabled veterans. The right-wing nationalists who wanted to see strong, heroic representations of military men instead of Toller’s Hinkemann came from precisely the circles that were most receptive to Schultze-Naumburg’s arguments. These debates about traditionalism or modernism, in which attitudes toward the social and aesthetic positions of disabled people played a central role, foreshadowed the Nazis’ campaign against degenerate art. In the preface to the third edition of his book, published in 1938 after the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, Schultze-Naumburg praised the cultural politics of the Nazis. Here, just as he had greeted efforts to keep disabled people out of sight or eliminate them, he stated that many of his hopes had been realized for the “remnants of the degenerate art of the Republic had almost totally disappeared.”¹²¹

Disabled People Tell Their Own Stories

Self-Advocacy Organizations

Discourses about medical treatment, rehabilitation, degeneracy, and eugenics were for the most part discourses of nondisabled people about what should be done to help, train, control, or eliminate disabled people. Furthermore, nondisabled Weimar artists and authors only created narrowly circumscribed representations of disabled veterans or workers that fit their political agendas and almost never depicted other areas of disabled people's lives or people with other types of disabilities. But how did disabled people themselves respond to these varying discourses? How did they perceive and organize themselves to represent their interests in the Weimar Republic? The heterogeneity of the disabled population would require complex historical answers to these questions, but several significant trends and examples may be indicated here. In the majority of instances, however, the life stories of disabled people were not deemed worth recording or taking seriously, and so they have been lost forever. Little is known about the subjective experiences of children, young people, and women with disabilities—whether in medical or rehabilitation settings or in daily life. Similarly, almost nothing is known about how people with cognitive disabilities and mental illnesses—a prime target of the racial hygienists and always the most stigmatized group—experienced their lives inside or outside institutions.

Nevertheless, there were significant efforts by disabled people during the Weimar Republic to expand their rights in the new German democracy, critique the negative ways others perceived them, and tell their own stories. Disabled veterans were a massive group of adult men who had all acquired their disabilities in the war and thus claimed the nation's support. Their war victims' associations, which had affiliations across the political spectrum from the Communist Party to the German Nationalists, were the first large, influential organizations of disabled people.¹²² In turn, some groups of disabled civilians also began to organize for the first time to demand treatment under the law equal to that accorded to disabled veterans. The Reich Association of the Blind (Reichsdeutscher Blindenverband), for example, founded in 1912, had fourteen thousand members by the end of the Weimar Republic. In 1920 and 1922, groups of the so-called peace blind demonstrated successfully in Berlin to be covered by the social welfare laws passed for the "war blind." And smaller, more specialized organizations, from the German Association of Blind Academics (Verein der blinden Akademiker Deutschlands) to the Association of Blind Industrial Work-

ers (Verein blinder Industriearbeiter), worked to further the interests of their members.¹²³

Deaf Germans had been especially active since the nineteenth century in organizing their own clubs and associations.¹²⁴ The first newspaper for deaf people, *Der Taubstummenfreund* (The Deaf-Mute's Friend), was founded in 1872, and others included *Die Stimme* (The Voice) and *Der deutsche Gehörlose* (The Deaf German). Political, social, and athletic associations of deaf people flourished in Weimar Germany, with about twenty-five existing in Berlin alone in 1932. The political groups there mirrored those among the hearing population, including the Deaf Labor Union Group of the Workers' Alliance, the Deaf Labor Union Group in the Social Democratic Party, the German Nationalist Group, the Deaf Section of the Nazi Party, and the largest one, the Greater Berlin Deaf Section of the Communist Party. Deaf people also organized around issues of specific relevance to them, and in 1927 they combined their regional associations into the Reich Union of the Deaf of Germany (Reichsverband der Gehörlosen Deutschlands or REGEDE).

One of the main goals of REGEDE was to create more positive perceptions among members of the public about the capabilities of deaf people. To further this aim, the organization produced an hour-long film, *Verkannte Menschen* (Misjudged People, 1932). Directed and with a script by Wilhelm Ballier, who was both deaf and a Nazi sympathizer, the film is an important document about the German deaf community in the final years of the Weimar Republic.¹²⁵ The first part concentrates on education. In contrast to the past, when deaf people had to depend on charity, the film shows the advances made in contemporary Germany. There is compulsory education for all deaf children, who learn to speak, read, and write; acquire work skills; and grow up to participate in the electoral process. The second part emphasizes all the ways in which deaf people are good German citizens even though they are often misjudged and rejected. They are shown leading productive, useful lives at work in factories, laboratories, and dental offices, at home, or on the farm. When they are not working, they participate in community activities such as sports. The film challenged eugenic trends by showing a deaf married couple communicating orally with their hearing child and by reminding its viewers that 90 percent of the children of deaf parents could hear. In the closing image of the film, a stereotypical blond, muscular, "Aryan"-looking man holds a work implement over his shoulder while the voice-over admonishes the spectator, "Don't pity, give them their rights: work and bread." The film portrays deaf people as capable, normal, and happy and only seeking an end to the discriminatory employment practices of the hearing world. The Nazis did not want to

promote this positive image of the deaf community, however, and so the Reich minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, banned the film in 1934.

Physically disabled Germans founded their first self-advocacy organization in 1919 in Berlin. It was called the Self-Help League of the Physically Handicapped (Selbsthilfebund der Körperbehinderten or SBK), and it changed its name to the Reichsbund der Körperbehinderten (RBK) in 1931. The life stories of the individuals involved in this organization, as well as their ideas about the proper place for physically disabled people in society, present very different pictures from those promulgated by the rehabilitation experts. The SBK was also known as the Perl League (Perl-Bund) after Otto Perl (1882–1951), one of its most active founders.¹²⁶ Perl's story reveals an independent thinker who worked to benefit others in spite of his extremely limited circumstances. Born on a farm close to Torgau in Saxony, Perl contracted a joint inflammation at the age of thirteen that left his limbs stiff and largely immobilized. His mother cared for him until her death in 1898, and then he lived in various invalid homes (Siechenhäuser) for the next ten years. These were institutions for the poor that provided the bare necessities to people of all ages and with all types of physical and mental disabilities, the sick and dying, alcoholics, and so forth. In 1908, Perl moved to the Oberlinhaus in Nowawes, close to Potsdam, an institution for crippled children run by the Inner Mission of the Protestant Church. He had never attended school but always read and studied on his own, and in 1918, encouraged by a teacher, he passed his Abitur examination. By then, he had learned to walk short distances with crutches, and in 1922, probably helped by an assistant or friend, he began to study at the Humboldt University in Berlin while living in an old-age home there. He studied for four semesters before moving to another institution in Nuremberg in 1926. In that year, he published a book, *Krüppeltum und Gesellschaft im Wandel der Zeit* (The Crippled and Society throughout the Ages), the first history of disabled people in Germany by a disabled writer. Against his will, he was transferred in 1934 to an invalid home in Magdeburg. Nothing is known about his life for the next nine years, but in an autobiographical sketch of 1946 he recalled the Nazi "terror" in the institution, saying that patients had to refrain from insisting on their rights. He specifically mentioned being a witness to "euthanasia," stating, "Many a person from my surroundings was forced to take the path to the lethal injection."¹²⁷ In 1943, he went to live with his brother, then back to an invalid home in Wittenberg, where he died in 1951. Throughout his life, in spite of his severe disability, Perl resisted oppressive circumstances and asserted his humanity and his rights.

Perl frequently described how he suffered as an intelligent, young, physically disabled man confined in institutions with—in his words—idiots, epileptics, morphine addicts, and people with all types of illnesses, including tuberculosis and venereal diseases.¹²⁸ This negative personal experience of being equated in life-defining situations with “worthless cripples” led him and his fellow activists in the SBK to emphasize that they were merely physically disabled and frequently to support eugenic measures directed against the mentally impaired. Accordingly, the name they gave their organization is revealing with respect to their self-conception and goals. They coined the word *körperbehindert* (physically handicapped) in order to set themselves above the “inferior” feeble-minded or mentally ill. By using this term, they wanted to emphasize that their minds were sound and also that many of them were capable of working and being productive citizens in contrast to mentally infirm cripples. In a similar manner, many disabled veterans had also distanced themselves from the word *cripple* with its connotations of helplessness, burdensomeness, and incompetence. As early as February 1915, high-ranking military officials had declared that soldiers injured in war should not be referred to as war cripples since this was an “unsuitable, ugly, unpleasant” word.¹²⁹ Rather, they preferred the terms *war invalid* (Kriegsinvaliden) or *war injured* (Kriegsbeschädigter or Kriegsversehrter).

The SBK defined itself as an organization for people who were physically disabled from birth or childhood rather than for disabled veterans or workers. In 1929, ten years after its founding, it had fifty local chapters with about six thousand members.¹³⁰ It participated in conferences and exhibitions, created its own work-training centers, and published a newsletter that became a full-fledged journal called *Der Körperbehinderte* (The Physically Handicapped). In many ways, the goals of the SBK for physically disabled people hardly differed from those of the rehabilitation experts: medical treatment, educational and vocational training, appropriate work, and financial independence rather than charity. However, these activists insisted on determining for themselves the best ways to achieve these goals, which put them fundamentally at odds with all paternalistic approaches. Along these lines, Perl’s book provides an eloquent early rejection of the medical model of disability in favor of the social model with its declaration, “The subject here is not a medical or scientific question, but a legal principle: namely, the right to self-determination, which welfare law has always denied to welfare recipients!”¹³¹ It was this insistence on self-determination that caused some care providers to feel quite threatened by the activities of the SBK, as did

one pastor from the Protestant Inner Mission, who called “the Perl League members the Spartacists among the cripples receiving welfare support.”¹³²

In contrast to the physiognomic views of experts such as Biesalski and Würtz, members of the SBK argued that there was no such thing as an abnormal “cripple soul” that necessitated the segregation of physically disabled people and the special education of disabled children in institutions. Rather, they argued that remaining part of the family and normal daily life was the basis for healthy individual development. In particular, the women members of the SBK advocated educating disabled children in regular schools with their nondisabled peers, asserting that this would benefit all the children concerned. One of the most active proponents of this mainstreaming was Marie Gruhl (1881–1929), the only woman among the founders of the SBK.¹³³ Born without feet into a middle-class family (her father was a school inspector), she used prostheses and a wheelchair. With the loving support of her parents, she attended a regular school and became a secondary school teacher in Berlin. Gruhl acknowledged both the medical treatment she received and her integration into the world around her, writing, “Everything imaginable was done to improve my physical ability and make me as self-reliant as possible. But aside from this I was brought up like a normal, healthy child. I grew up in the sunshine of my parents’ home; I was allowed to attend public school; I was allowed to get an education that followed my inclinations; and today I am allowed to assume my place in life as a public schoolteacher together with healthy people.” Hoping to provide more disabled children with these advantages, Gruhl traveled to institutions for crippled children throughout Germany, where she urged both staff and parents to send these children to public schools. At the national congress on cripples’ welfare held in Leipzig in 1920, she summed up her convictions by stating that a crippled child could not be prepared for life in an institutional environment that was not free but rather should be completely integrated into the “community of the healthy.”

The efforts of the SBK to promote self-determination and resist the methods of the experts generally concentrated on concrete areas such as education and work. In one instance, however, a member of the SBK undertook a unique project intended to refute the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary rehabilitation psychology. Little is known about the life of Irma Dresdner.¹³⁴ Disabled since childhood, she was a Jewish teacher at the Philanthropin, the school of the Israelite Community (Israelitische Gemeinde) in Frankfurt am Main. She was involved with the bourgeois women’s movement as well as SBK and RBK groups in

Frankfurt and Berlin. When the RBK became a Nazi organization, it expelled Dresdner along with all its Jewish members, and all further traces of her life are lost. In April 1933, Dresdner managed to publish an article entitled “Über Körperbehinderung und seelische Entwicklung” (On Physical Handicap and Emotional Development). There she reproached rehabilitation experts such as Biesalski, Würtz, and others for developing their theories without taking the perspectives of disabled people themselves into account. In particular, quoting Biesalski, she criticized their concept of the “cripple soul” as characterized by abnormalities such as oversensitivity, irritability, resentment, vengefulness, envy, distrust, rigidity, arrogance, self-centeredness, and delusions of grandeur.¹³⁵ By contrast, Dresdner asserted that in her lifetime of experience as a disabled person and in the company of disabled people she had rarely observed such characteristics among them. She noted, however, that there were almost no readily available autobiographical accounts by disabled people that might challenge the unfounded opinions of these experts.

Consequently, Dresdner distributed a list of eighteen questions, along with a request for life stories, to members of the RBK in 1932, asking them how they would describe themselves.¹³⁶ She received responses from people in Frankfurt, Berlin, and other cities, which she collected and analyzed. A number of the questions explicitly referred to the assumptions of Würtz’s “cripple psychology,” and in their answers the respondents almost always denied having unusual feelings of resentment, vengefulness, envy, inferiority, disadvantage, self-centeredness, and so forth. Some made a point of saying that they only felt hostile, sad, or frightened when healthy people stared or laughed at them, thus turning the tables and showing that these negative feelings were caused by the behavior of the nondisabled rather than the supposedly inherent inadequacies of the disabled. Many noted that they were accepted by relatives and friends, had playmates as children, attended school in a wheelchair, and so forth, and some were proud to be self-supporting. Frequently, they stated that they did not dwell on their disabilities but rather had a wide variety of interests such as hobbies, music, swimming, reading, listening to the radio, and religion. Love and marriage seemed to be the most problematic area since almost all the respondents were single and felt that potential partners had rejected them because of their disabilities.

Dresdner selected the life story of one woman, a seamstress of forty-four, as deserving of particular attention (410–11). Born in a small village in northern Germany, this woman had contracted polio at the age of three and been left with a paralyzed leg. Her family neglected her, kept

her apart from her siblings, and did not send her to school. She learned how to read on her own. Finally, at the age of fifteen, with the help of the village minister, she received medical treatment, some schooling, and vocational training. When she wrote to Dresdner, she was supporting both herself and her mother. Dresdner emphasized how respectable, responsible, generous, and forgiving this woman was in contrast to the experts' ideas about the negative characteristics of the "cripple soul." In general, the responses of physically disabled people to Dresdner's survey totally contradicted the stigmatizing views that were typical of contemporary rehabilitation psychology. No greater contrast to Hans Würtz's deterministic linking of physical disability with emotional abnormality can be imagined than this declaration by one of the respondents: "Today I can truthfully say that my handicap made me more free. It made me into an independent, thinking, active person" (425). It goes without saying that because Dresdner's article was published in 1933 these significant findings could have no resonance. Consequently, it is all the more important to remember her project as one of the first instances in which physically disabled Germans tried in a coherent way to define their own identities and present themselves as human beings rather than as institutionalized cases.

Portrait of the Writer Max Herrmann-Neiße

Aside from members of such organized groups, the stigmatized position of disabled people and their lack of access to higher education meant that almost no other disabled individuals wrote explicitly at this time about how they experienced disability. One notable exception is the author and lyric poet Max Herrmann-Neiße, who became part of the avant-garde artistic scene in Berlin and reflected at numerous points in his writings on how his disability had affected his life. Herrmann-Neiße, the son of a tavern owner, was born in 1886 in the Silesian town of Neiße, as his name indicates. He was apparently always frail, and he developed a spinal curvature after a fall from a small bridge as a child. Others described him as dwarfish, disproportioned, hunchbacked, and ugly, thus defining his disability as much in aesthetic terms as with regard to functional impairments. Herrmann-Neiße recalled growing up in a loving, protective family and feeling relatively at ease in elementary school. However, when he entered the Gymnasium at the age of nine, his new classmates constantly bullied and humiliated him because of his appearance. As he entered adulthood, he suffered keenly from rejection by women until he became engaged to the beautiful Leni Gebeck in 1912. To escape the hostile, stifling atmosphere in Neiße, where provin-

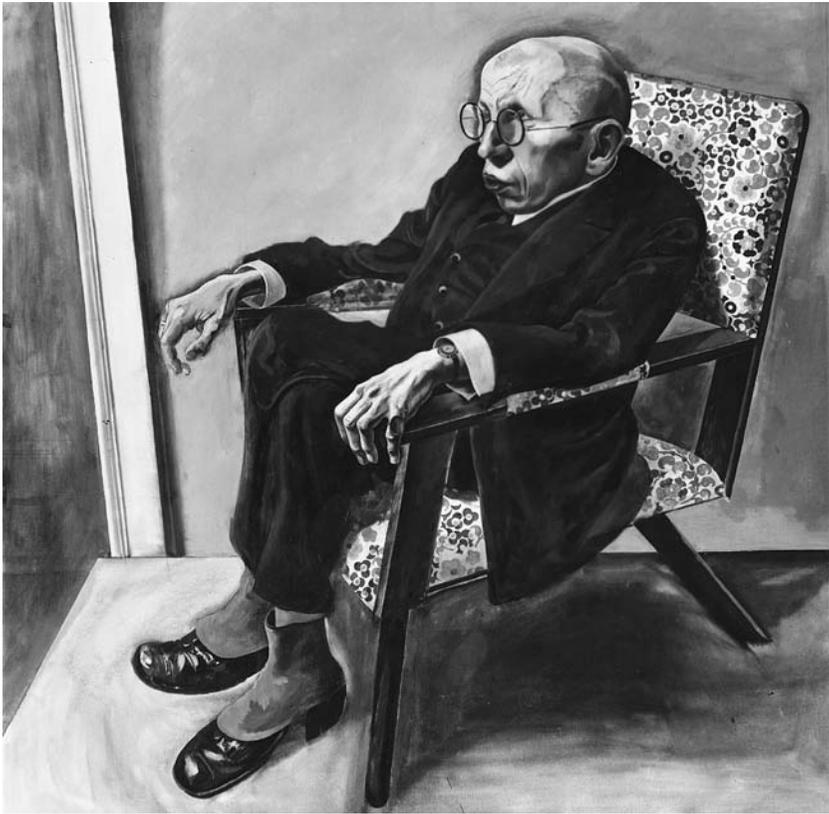


Fig. 10. George Grosz, *Portrait of the Writer Max Herrmann-Neiße*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 100 × 101 cm. Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim. (Art © Estate of George Grosz, licensed by Visual Artists and Galleries Association, Inc. [VAGA], New York.)

cial gossips dubbed Leni the “cripple’s whore,” the two moved to Berlin in 1917 and married.¹³⁷

In an essay written in the late 1920s, Herrmann-Neiße reflected on why he had become a writer. He remembered an early interest in literature and theater but also stated that he developed intellectual interests partly as compensation for his disability, explaining, “The fundamentally hard, violent, terrible impetus that—so to say—caused my wound to bleed, the first really intense suffering that turned me into a poet, was my experience of physical deformity, of being malformed.”¹³⁸ Having experienced so much mistreatment and exclusion because of his “ugliness,” he began to play off his “intellectual superiority” against those who were “stupidly healthy.” He recounted, for example, writing one of his earliest short prose pieces, “Groteske” (Grotesque), after his more

robust classmates had bullied him mercilessly. In this text, a man armed with a revolver appears in school, planning to shoot all the “healthy, strong, beautiful” boys, the “empty-headed elite” who have not been “poisoned by the destructive spirit of the Enlightenment.” The man intends to spare “cripples and geniuses,” however.¹³⁹ Herrmann-Neiße’s earliest poems frequently express fury as well as sadness and resignation, but he soon stopped referring explicitly to his disability in his lyric poetry, turning to more traditional subjects such as love, landscape, and moods. This does not mean, however, that he felt more accepted as an adult than he had been when he was younger, as he explained in this statement about his works: “If the truth be told, only the form of my works became more mature. With respect to experiences, the same things can still happen to me today that happened to me earlier. I am no safer from tactless insults now than I was in the past.”¹⁴⁰

Herrmann-Neiße by no means thought of himself as a victim, however, but rather he tried to develop his talents and live life to the fullest. In Berlin, he wrote theater reviews, published prize-winning poetry, and even acted onstage in his own play, *Albine und Aujust* (Albine and Aujust). Using the current vocabulary of degeneracy, a review in the *Berliner Tageblatt* critiqued his performance, observing that he “appears on stage, looking sickly, a degenerate sight, but uninhibited. He makes jokes at his own expense and is suffused with cutting irony. But he also intimates that he has risen far above his own problems.”¹⁴¹ Enjoying nightlife wherever he lived, Herrmann-Neiße spent much of his time in Berlin artists’ cafes, theaters, cabarets, and brothels. He cultivated contacts with many of the best-known artists and writers of his day, including George Grosz, who became his friend and painted the well-known *Portrait of the Writer Max Herrmann-Neiße*. Shown at the Mannheim Neue Sachlichkeit Exhibition in 1925, this painting was later displayed by the Nazis as a prime example of degenerate art both because of its formal distortions and because it portrayed a deformed person. Herrmann-Neiße’s bohemian lifestyle meant that he was never self-supporting. Rather, he and Leni lived in a ménage à trois with Leni’s lover, a well-to-do jeweler named Alphonse Sondheimer, who supported the three of them. This arrangement lasted until Herrmann-Neiße’s death in London exile in 1941. Leni then married Sondheimer and committed suicide when he died in 1961. It would be fascinating to know more about the life of this woman, who dared to break with social conventions in so many ways.

Immediately after the Reichstag fire on February 27, 1933, the three left Germany for as yet undetermined reasons in March 1933, first going

to Switzerland and then settling in London. Herrmann-Neiße became a member of the London PEN Club, moved in circles of exiled writers, and corresponded with some of the most prominent exiled intellectuals, including Thomas and Heinrich Mann. While in exile, he continued to write poetry and also wrote drafts of several long novels that were never published in his lifetime. One of these, *Die Bernert-Paula* (Paula Bernert), contains an especially revealing depiction of disability. The main character is a hunchbacked girl from a poor family. The outsider's perspective resulting from her physical difference enables her to see through hypocrisy and lies and to perceive reality more accurately than others. Since her disability liberates her from constricting social and gender roles, Paula is amoral and independent. It is easy to imagine that the exiled author was drawing on his own life experiences when he had his narrator describe Paula as follows: "In any event such a creature is annoying to every sort of crowd, because she cannot be used for their purposes. The crowd immediately perceives: here is someone who doesn't want to do what we have to do."¹⁴² This passage hints at Herrmann-Neiße's anti-Nazi convictions, which he expressed more explicitly in his published poetry.

In a letter to Hermann Kesten on January 17, 1934, Herrmann-Neiße explained that, although he was neither Jewish nor a leftist, he opposed fascism as a believer in freedom and democracy who did not want to live "in the atmosphere of lies, torture, and robbery that prevails in Germany today."¹⁴³ Beyond this, however, unlike the disabled Nazi party members and sympathizers in organizations such as REGEDE and the RBK, his experiences as a disabled person obviously contributed to his antifascism. He rejected trends in mass culture that Nazism would incorporate, particularly the anti-intellectualism that overvalued uniform physical beauty and health. Along these lines, he wrote already in the late 1920s that "overestimation of unearned physical beauty and contempt for intellectual and artistic achievements are enjoying scandalous triumphs in an age obsessed with athletics" (437). More specifically, the abuse he endured also sensitized him to threatening developments. As early as 1912, he wrote to Leni that "everything rigidly male, warlike, and arrogantly correct is a hostile principle to me" (26). Later, in an essay probably written in exile, he linked his school experiences with contemporary events in Nazi Germany as follows: "For the first time in my life I was exposed to the brutal reality of a human community in which the weak were totally at the mercy of the physically strong. For the first time I experienced for myself what brute force is and what it can do. . . . This early suffering already contained every-

thing that violent people with no inhibitions are doing to defenseless victims in Germany today” (16). Herrmann-Neiße’s experiences as a disabled person were painful, but they also opened his eyes to the violence underlying Nazi propaganda about racial purity, health, and beauty. His insights into this reality led him to identify himself as an antifascist and to flee Nazi barbarism. As a result, the Nazi government revoked his citizenship in 1938, thus condemning his hope for preserving the democratic traditions of Germany to the void of exile.