Reviews

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Pier Paolo Piciucco, editor. *Contemporary Vulnerabilities*. Torino: Nuova Trauben, 2023. 350 pp. Hardback. 50 Euros. ISBN 9788899312909.

In eighteen essays by an international roster of scholars, addressing a wide range of social phenomena and particularly works of literature, this volume richly explores contemporary vulnerabilities. Along the way, the authors demonstrate the centrality of vulnerability, a concept somewhat recently theorized and analyzed, in modern life and letters.

A list of the vulnerable discussed here would include women, women of color in particular, animals, forests and the natural environment generally, robots, clones and other nonhuman characters, migrants and immigrants, the protagonists of autofiction and memoir, unreliable narrators, texts themselves, readers vulnerable *to* texts, indigenous communities, sons of controlling fathers, people living with disabilities, and the *form* of Jon McGregor's fiction. This is a long though not exhaustive list, but these identifications are, in almost every case, compelling.

One might ask, well, who isn't vulnerable? And several of these authors would reply that *no one* – no human being, or possibly even *no living thing* – is exempt from vulnerability. Judith Butler, for instance, is credited with locating "a newfound awareness that we are *all* vulnerable subjects," located, that is, in those experiences that "follow from bodily life" (199). Michael Greaney, in a discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro (who, as almost a laureate of vulnerability, earns two chapters devoted to his work), attributes to Ishiguro the assumption that "vulnerability is the best and most compelling evidence we have of the reality of human interdependence" (301). And Erinn Cunniff Gilson, author of *The Ethics of Vulnerability: a Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* and of an

Afterword to this volume, declares that "What matters most about vulnerability – what gives the concept its salience – is that it is definitive of our condition as human beings, indeed, as living beings" (338).

The universality of vulnerability does not detract from the acuity of its observation in particular contexts, which means, for the most part, particular literary genres and texts. Among these are contemporary works of memoir and autofiction; novels of the end times, dystopian and apocalyptic fictions; nature writing; and novels about lives in the forest – the latter in a particularly strong essay by Caren Irr. Chapters are devoted to texts by Ishiguro, Jon McGregor, John Burnside and Graham Swift, Kanya d'Almeida, Sigrid Nunez, Arundhati Roy, John Lanchester, Siri Hustvedt, Martin Amis and Philip Roth.

These last two deserve special attention, since each of them is an exercise in partial rehabilitation of two authors widely accused of misogyny. Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer highlight the presence of willing listeners (to women's stories) in Roth's novels and try to "demonstrate how a feminist reading does not simply accept Roth's women as 'monsters' or pathological cases but rather looks for clues in the text that point readers toward different conclusions" (173). As for Martin Amis, Cristina Ionica addresses his use of "pretend vulnerabilities" *en route* to pointing out "Amis's consistency in emphasizing the *relentlessness* of the masculinist drive towards more power, exploitation, enjoyment, and consumption, and relatedly, the *continuum*, within masculinist social management systems, between domestic abuse and slavery and genocide" (139).

Ionica's essay, like most of these, is written with clarity and concision, though her coining of the identifier "the white heteronormative capitalist gerontocratic structures of power" (135), which she repeats several times (an acronym would have been helpful) makes her prose a bit clotted. I much prefer the forcefulness of "the phenomenon of dick-waving, ubiquitous in right-wing circles as in Amis's novel, is too obvious to necessitate extended discussion" (148). I would also point to the chapters by Vanessa Guignery (on Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*), Christine Berberich (on Britain's allegedly vulnerable borders and Lanchester's *The Wall*), Ruth Maxey (on Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*), and Piciucco's own chapter on Burnside and Swift as especially strong and illuminating.

One regrettable feature of this collection, which is handsomely printed and bound, is inadequate proofreading. One regrets to read a phrase like this: "the earlier set of bosk [books] were at pains" (35) or "the self is private, protocetid [protected, presumably] from stoical contingency" (26) or "But the reality is that the genre in which *The Topeka School*, as contrasted to Lerner's own poetry, and his writing about poetry) is in, the novel, is perched halfway between poetry and the spread, Adam's personal trajectory is self-corrective" (36) [your guess is as good as mine]. These are all from one chapter, but errors of punctuation and syntax occur too regularly for an important scholarly work like this, demonstrating, perhaps, another site of vulnerability. Flaubert's dictum, "prose is like hair, it shines with combing," which Julian Barnes likes to quote, can be questioned (one of my students responded, "who wants shiny hair?"), but care in editing and proofreading are part of producing a book that deserves to be admired and reread.

Nevertheless, I would recommend this collection to anyone interested in how vulnerability (and its related topics, precarity and an ethics of care) function in 21st century fiction and culture. If we are indeed all vulnerable as a condition of our humanness and of our interdependence, it is well to think harder about what this means for all of us.

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