

EDITORIAL

Reading between the Lines:
Old and New Vulnerabilities

Though not a themed issue, the present volume offers an assortment of articles on a variety of topics which are, to a large extent, related in a subtle way, since they all speak to our sense of vulnerability. Interestingly enough, vulnerability is an issue of topical concern all the more so as vulnerability studies have developed in a sustained manner since the 2000s, with numerous articles and books exploring the issue. Despite the fact that the term ‘vulnerability’ was first used in poverty and development studies in the 1970s and 1980s to discuss the effects of hazards and natural catastrophes on particular groups, the term was extensively used by Judith Butler (though the term used by her was ‘precarity’) in the wake of 9/11 to refer to the exposure of countries and peoples to acts of violence related to war, as well as to critically reflect on the lives of those whose vulnerabilities remained unseen and unacknowledged. In recent years, vulnerability has turned into a prevalent concern in academic discourse, impacting fields as diverse as ethics, anthropology, ecocriticism, philosophy, literary criticism, psychology and sociology. If analyses of social inequality have contributed to the fast development of the field, openness and sensitivity to cultural, material and bodily vulnerabilities have considerably extended the purview of the field, making it appeal to all of us.

Many of the articles included in this volume reflect the theme of vulnerability even if the theme is not foregrounded. Thus, Corina Selejan's article entitled "Metafiction, Defamiliarization and Cognitive Science: Andrew Crumey's *Mr Mee* and Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2*" indirectly touches on the vulnerabilities of academics who, despite their wide reading and lively minds, turn out to be ridiculously innocent of the world and of its new technology. Selejan uses the lens of cognitive literary studies to examine these two metafictional novels, dwelling on formal aspects which are analyzed in relation to how the texts defamiliarize a number of categories, including reading, the internet, artificial intelligence, science, art, consciousness, memory, and fiction itself. Selejan also explores the readers' oscillation between participation and detachment, as well as the impact of the texts' self-reflexivity on their thoughts, in an effort to unveil the books' attempts to promote a conversation between science and technology, as well as fiction and the humanities.

Iuliana Pop's article resonates with the vulnerabilities of the readers who, in their effort to make sense of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, have to grapple with the cultural implications of the intertext. Pop points to the way in which Joyce carefully incorporated Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* into *Finnegans Wake*, modifying it in the process in order to fit the Irish culture. The article skillfully analyzes Vico's philosophical ideas which are woven throughout the *Wake*, and which give it structure and allow intertextual units to be layered, resulting in the multiplication of intended meanings and significations.

Ovidiu Matiu highlights political vulnerabilities as suggested by Junot Diaz in his *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Matiu investigates the threats of dictatorship in both politics and literature, pointing at how writers' political stances affect the way in which their writings "do" politics. Matiu's analysis of the extensive footnotes included in the novel proves that they are not paratexts but *are* also text. They do not interrupt the narrative, rather they guide the reader with regard to how to take in the information

provided by the main text which they challenge and continue simultaneously. Matiu also argues convincingly that the footnotes represent Diaz's attack against the Trujillo's hagiographers and against the way in which (his)story is written.

Maria-Miruna Ciocoi-Pop-Vecsei investigates Sarah Hall's "Theatre 6," a short story which spotlights the vulnerability of women who are denied abortion. The real-life tragedy of Savita Halappanavar, who was refused an abortion due to a septic miscarriage in 2012 and died of septic shock at Galway University Hospital, is the starting point of a short story which presents a bleak picture of a not too distant future in which the Hunter Fetal Care Act legally prioritizes the lives of unborn children over those of mothers. Although the story's timeline is unclear, it is generally accepted to take place in a future in which anti-abortion sentiments from today have taken over the British judiciary. The article addresses the being / non-being dichotomy from several angles, raising disturbing questions about women's "precarious lives."

A different type of vulnerability emerges in Andreea Moise's article focusing on the community-based performance *Do You Know Who I Am?*, that looks into the condition of the 'undocumented migrants' from the USA. The state of undocumentedness is defined in the play as characterized by vulnerability, uprootedness, exploitation and constant fear. Moise examines the stylistic and thematic oratorical elements of the dramatic performance in light of the performers' ontological construction as undocumented, unwelcome, and subjects/objects of racial hatred. The image of the Mexican immigrant that is compounded of social stigma and constant labeling, in addition to the undocumented condition, becomes the focal point of a shared imagination that affects the immigrant's ability to survive in society.

Women's vulnerable condition is the starting point for Alexandra Mitrea's article that discusses the poetry of Eavan Boland, one of the best-known Irish women poets of the last fifty years. Boland has constantly tried to recuperate the image of Irish women who have been vigorously silenced in history and denied

agency to speak in their own right, despite the many feminised embodiments of the nation present in the Irish tradition. The poet's preoccupation with revealing missing stories as well as missing histories, her perpetual questioning of historiography, and her forays into the past have all been aimed at bringing to light women's hidden stories, of saving them from "outside history." Mitrea foregrounds the instances where the poetic text fractures, and points to the way in which the poet herself succumbs to more or less the same stereotypes and preconceptions that she vehemently criticizes.

Another type of history is foregrounded in Teodora Creangă's article dealing with phonaesthetic structures. Creangă contends that the phonaestheme could be placed next to the morpheme, which is conventionally regarded as the smallest language unit endowed with meaning. The article refutes the notion that the sign is solely arbitrary, providing a more thorough and integrated theoretical viewpoint on the nature of the phonaestheme. After achieving this goal, the article's main focus is that of determining how and to what degree phonaesthetic meaning exists across languages. This is accomplished by discussing and applying extant phonosemantic classifications in the context of Romanian phonaesthemes.

The last article in the collection instantiates the theme of vulnerability from the perspective of ecocriticism. Nyanchi Marcel Ebliylu foregrounds ecocritical concerns in his analysis of *God Was African* by Nkemngong Nkengasong and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* by Cyrus Mistry. The article pleads for the preservation of the environment in the face of all kinds of threats, such as the transformation of nature into a source of renewable and artificial energies. The ecocritical perspective helps Ebliylu point out how ethno-religious groups construct their gods in the natural environment and how their ancestral and religious connections to their environment are revealed through their lifestyles, artifacts, rituals, and customs. The destruction of the environment makes

such groups vulnerable, posing serious threats to centuries-old ways of life, but also to the earth's fragile natural environment.

This reading of the articles from the vantage point of vulnerability studies is, of course, just one possible reading among many other possible approaches. It is, however, an approach that may alert us to many of the threats of the contemporary world, challenging us to be more sensitive and more perceptive, to realize how "precarious" our lives are or may become.

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