

*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne  
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

# Contemporary Vulnerabilities



Edited by Pier Paolo Piciucco  
*With an afterword by Erinn Cunniff Gilson*

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*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere  
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*Edited by Pier Paolo Picinco*



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## *Introduction*



# THE MYTH OF THE VINCIBLE ACHILLES

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When I was in secondary school, the reading of (the Italian translation of) Homer's *Iliad* had been selected by the Ministry of Education as part of the regular syllabus for third year students. I distinctly remember that one day, sitting in the car next to my father on the way home, I told him about it and his comment sounded something like: "Homer is possibly the best poet ever. He was so good that we do not even know whether he really existed". I cannot swear that he used these exact words, but he certainly said something that left me totally puzzled for the careless logic of the statement. It is likely that my sense of surprise was such that I was left speechless, unable to confute it.

However, that was not the only situation that contributed to create a sense of confusion that over the years my mind has associated with Homer's epic. The best, as they say, was yet to come. Our professor of Italian and Literature was a young woman—so charmingly young that some of my schoolmates experienced their first crush during her lessons—who, despite her lack of experience, was a very passionate teacher, able to spellbind us—the boys a little more easily than the girls—into the imaginary world of literature. Now, having become a teacher myself, I must acknowledge that it is not an easy task at all for a professor to teach the *Iliad* to students aged 12-13, but I must concede that she was the ideal choice since she invariably succeeded in creating a sense of excitement and fascination about the development of the story. In a few cases, I even remember reading the successive passages of the book on my own before class, eager to know what would happen next to Ajax, Diomedes or Achilles. Waiting for the subsequent lesson a few days away—if not the following week—seemed to me such a long stretch of time that elevated the strange mixture of curiosity and anxiety over the fate of these heroes to an unbearable torture. Clearly enough, this speaks volumes about her magnetic skill as a teacher.

In the course of time, and whenever my mind turns back to those epic schooldays, I think I may have had a glimpse of her ability in creating an irresistible sense of involvement with the whole story for all of us young students. In her elucidation of the *Iliad*, in fact, the poem was less about the chronicle of the siege of the city of Troy than the celebration of the intrepid deeds of "the invincible Achilles". Indeed, it certainly is, but her focus on the Greek hero—and the ensuing decline of the remaining characters all around—almost totally emptied

the stage except for him; possibly, to our eyes Achilles seemed even more heroic, fearless and potent because of the lack of competition that it is likely that she—rather than Homer himself—fashioned for him. Needless to say, my interpretation of this fact largely stems from my powers of invention since I cannot claim to have gathered material proof to corroborate my theory but, nonetheless, I cannot push aside the idea that her enthusiastic passion for the imaginary world surrounding the ten-year war of Troy may also have been a viable means for her to give way to a parallel fervour, for a real man this time. She may have been in love with her partner, her husband or—who knows?—with her lover, whom she considered to be her personal Achilles. Doctor Freud would possibly have said that her passionate lessons which focussed on “the invincible Achilles” were an act of sublimation to hide her passion for her own sturdy warrior. In truth, the fantasy of a pretty young woman in the company of such a virile companion has always fascinated me and her clear predilection for Achilles somehow provided material evidence for her inability to keep her feelings concealed.

In love with a Muscle Man or not, indeed her appeal for “the invincible Achilles” was contagious for all of us, and this time I also mean the girls. Invariably, we all found the description of Achilles’s slaying of Hector, later dragged around by his chariot, nothing short of electrifying, as if we had instantly transformed into a classroom of bloodthirsty little barbarians; no one was horrified by the brutal narrative of that account. On the other hand, we all turned into delicate models of sensibility when the narrating voice was busy describing how “the invincible Achilles” grieved over the news of his dearest friend Patroclus’s death. Speaking personally, he has been the only wrathful literary character ever able to win my sympathy. Ever. There was even a time when I doubted that our professor of Italian and Literature—and not Homer—was the real snake charmer enticing and triggering the emotions of an entire schoolroom. If anything, she was real, and I could testify to this.

All this persisted throughout that schoolyear, until one day our teacher quite nonchalantly told us that “the invincible Achilles” was eventually killed by Paris, who shot an arrow in his heel. The surprising effect caused by this dramatic news on all of us was considerable; I remember that it had a particularly disturbing backlash on me. Not only was it a great disappointment—as it was for all my classmates—to learn that our great hero died, and what is more at the hands of a warrior who was reportedly a coward, but again I found myself face to face with an upsetting mismatch of logic: how could it be possible that “the invincible Achilles” was vulnerable? On what grounds could invincibility be related to vulnerability? Rather, were not these two concepts supposedly the opposite of one another? The meaning itself of the word “invincible” was in jeopardy, but this could also eventually have repercussions on the meaning of the concept of “hero” that, a young boy like myself, fond of Japanese cartoons of robots and

space warriors, had already carefully constructed. I was in need of answers to all of these existential issues, and this is why I asked my teacher how it was possible for Achilles to be invincible when he could be killed. I remember that she remained silent for just a little while and then, wearing a captivating wide smile, she said almost as a matter of fact: “But he is a hero, he is not a god”. Of course, that answer did not make any sense to me but, since her reply had a conclusive tone to it, I was not encouraged to enquire further.

The unexpected discovery of the invincible Achilles’s vulnerability left me disoriented, I cannot deny it. What I found particularly unsettling was that I could hardly believe that this clumsiness in such a famous literary work had gone unnoticed for millennia. As far as I can remember, a period of disenchantment followed. I was certainly disappointed with my teacher, whom at the time I considered responsible for causing my great frustration, but even more I remember being disappointed with literature in general (fortunately, neither of these feelings lasted long); if the *Iliad*, displaying such blatant idiosyncrasies, was the work of the most important poet in the history of man, what about all the others?

A few decades later, this little volume of literary criticism (also) addresses the same queries that were troubling my early boyhood, even if the topic is tackled from a slightly different perspective. Turning this presentation into a more academic discourse, it is since the early 2000s that notions about how to define vulnerability—and to what extent we can say it affects surrounding topics, or remains affected by them—have been multifariously elaborated and questioned: even more, vulnerability in the twenty-first century has risen to be a dominant concern in academic debate widening its scope and extending its influence in areas as diverse as sociology, economics, ethics, anthropology, ecocriticism, philosophy, literary criticism and psychology; indeed, political studies, as well as legal, gender, trauma, queer and affect, plus a variety of many more subjects, have contributed to amplifying its range.

However, if on the one hand vulnerability analysis may be said to be quite a recent focus of investigation, on the other, it also displays a remarkable array of solutions, progress and amendments mainly resulting from the elaborate, disordinate—at times even unintentional—confrontation of criss-cross perspectives that have driven this research field towards an unpredictably rapid evolution. Quite predictably, though, analyses on social inequalities have provided a formidable springboard to this quick progression; from the very beginning, scholars have brought an imperative focus on the emerging phenomenon of the precariat—the social class positioned at the very bottom of the structures of contemporary societies made of labouring people who, lacking secure jobs or regular incomes, are often forced to migrate—aptly described as “a class-in-the-making”<sup>1</sup> by Guy Standing. A spotlight on specific subjects, selec-

<sup>1</sup> Guy Standing. *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, p. vii.

ted on the basis of race, class, gender, ethnicity or immigration status, and generally identified as the immediate victims of neo-liberal policies and contemporary crisis, has marked the evolution of the studies of one of the two main perspectives of this emergent discipline, forcing attention onto social, economic and ideological formation. Parallel to this, however, another orientation, open towards various kinds of cultural, material and bodily vulnerabilities, established a foothold. Studies on vulnerability engaged from this perspective tend to broaden the view of the subject matter, starting from the premise that this is not only a state which affects the have-nots of the world, but rather, is a general and pervasive human experience, and is therefore addressed as an ontological attribute of human existence. It is our human condition which, so to speak, invariably makes all of us have-nots. In a famous essay, Martha Albertson Fineman argued that “vulnerability is—and should be understood to be—universal and constant, inherent in the human condition”.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, but adopting an inspiring and thought-provoking rhetoric, the guest of honour of this volume, Erinn Cunniff Gilson, has perceptively stressed in her contribution: “We have never not been vulnerable”. (336) Researchers concerned with this study programme generally benefit from those instruments provided by humanities in general. Evidently enough, a clear dividing line between the two distinct ways of discussing the topic of vulnerability—the former situational, the latter ontological—is not always noticeable or possible to determine, since the relations between the two positions are profound and inextricable, establishing the solidity and complexity of the whole theoretical edifice.

In a way, therefore, Homer’s decision to create an invincible and, at the same time, vulnerable hero as well as exposing an unsettling incongruity, may also have been quite an ingenious foretelling of future avant garde projections; indifferent to either neo-liberal or post-Marxist philosophies, the Greek poet had purposely shaped his Achilles out of any ideological terrain, also because his protagonist’s relentlessly wrathful conduct would possibly have driven him towards committing unimaginable atrocities, had he been able to imagine how the post-modern world would fare.

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*Contemporary Vulnerabilities* tends to reflect the composite, elaborate and heterogeneous nature of the academic discourse at the very root of vulnerability analysis. The contributors to the present volume were originally invited to submit a paper offering an analysis of the ways in which Anglophone writers’ creative imagination in recent times had been triggered by increased feelings and awareness of vulnerability; they were free to choose a topic, a perspective, as well as to decree what ‘contemporary’ and ‘vulnerability’ may possibly mean or imply. As the list of contents clearly illustrates, their feedback has been assorted in the

<sup>2</sup> Martha Albertson Fineman. “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition”. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2008, p. 1.

extreme, becoming a factor—I assume—in making this volume stimulating to any reader interested in a debate on literary criticism and/or in a thorough analysis of dynamics in the present day. In this sense, *Contemporary Vulnerabilities* exhibits a very colourful response to possible interpretations to vulnerability analysis, adopting a vast range of perspectives and approaches to the given issue.

In fact, three authors—Irr, De Cristofaro and Head—have chosen to write about a wider selection of works by different authors, whereas three more—Hicks, Toth and myself—have mainly restricted the focus on to two or three works in total. Greaney, Ionica, Pozorski and Scheurer have instead picked a single author (curiously, it was always a man) and analysed his literary production in view of the ways in which his novels have been related to issues of vulnerability, while Ganapathy-Doré, Guignery, Ganteau, Maxey, Berberich, De Boever and Chetty have chosen to limit their investigation to a single work of fiction (or non-fiction). Alternatively, Birns has opted to have a bird's-eye view on autofiction, adopting a markedly theoretical perspective for his personal analysis. Almost all the papers have been written by a single author, whereas in the case of Pozorski-Scheurer this was the result of the collaboration of two minds. As regards the geographical collocation of the writers discussed in the papers, De Boever, Toth, Maxey, Pozorski and Scheurer have chosen to discuss works by American authors, whereas Guignery, Ganteau, Berberich, Greaney, Ionica and myself have turned our interest towards British writers. Ganapathy-Doré and Chetty have dealt with authors from the Indian sub-continent, while Irr, Birns, Head and De Cristofaro have trespassed geographical barriers, examining writers from the US, the UK and Canada. As for the academic background of the critics involved in this editorial project, 5 scholars work in American universities (6 when the count includes the guest of honour), 5 in the UK, 3 in France, 2 in Canada, 2 in South Africa, 1 in Germany and 1 in Italy. When it comes to gender, *Contemporary Vulnerabilities* presents 7 papers on male authors and 5 on women writers (Caren Irr has hastened to explain that her choice to examine 10 works exclusively by women writers was unintentional); finally, 5 authors have opted to discuss works by both male and female authors, showing quite a fair balance in interests and choices in the whole volume.

However, whilst these parameters are useful in understanding the possible direction of the present volume, the yardstick used to organise the layout of the volume has taken into consideration the perspective supported by the various critics when discussing their chosen topics. **Nicholas Birns** opens Section 1, entitled “Fictions of Subjectivity”, with the paper “Beyond the Refusing Self: Vulnerability, Subjectivity, Autofiction” where he calls attention to autofiction that, as practiced in the twenty-first century, represents a way of talking about the self that accommodates vulnerability. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the autobiographical novel shrank from the romantic subjectivity achieved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bildungsroman and emphasized an

ontology of the Refusing Self. This self was white, male, heteronormative, and solitary. Just as, in the work of Martha Fineman, vulnerability can be an alternative to reductive group identity, so can autofiction, as practiced by writers such as Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, and Honorée Fannone Jeffers, evade the poetics of the Refusing Self. It works by admitting that it is taken from real life and the personal experience of the author but also bringing in the experience of other people, including family and friends, and understanding that their story is part of the story of any given self. Autofiction also breaks the tendency of recent intellectual currents like object-oriented ontology to efface a subjectivity that even post-structuralism retained, by showing how selves can function among systems, precisely by laying bare their own vulnerability. In the contribution “Autoplastic Vulnerability in Contemporary American Memoir” **Josh Toth** explores the ethics of contemporary American memoir, while also stressing the etymological link between physical wounds and states of vulnerability. The central focus is autobiographical “fictions” that repudiate or move beyond the perverse irresponsibility (or ungroundedness) of the postmodern subject. Texts such as Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* (2019) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Twixt* (2011) traverse, while sustaining a kind of ontological gap, a wound of *vulnerability*. Associated in both texts with a “real life” and “undeniable” trauma (domestic abuse and the death of a child, respectively), this wound is proffered and sustained as the tender and always dehiscent gap between fiction and truth, the self who expresses and the self who is expressed, the form and its anterior content. Whether we speak more specifically about such narrative vulnerability as being “well approximated” or more troublingly “diffuse”, the sense we get is that an *ethical* memoir entails a radically “open” subject—endless self-exposure. The reader is allowed “in” even as (or *because*) the narrative threshold, the *cusp* of the Real, is sustained as an *infinite* distance. More autoplastic than autobiographic, such fictions harbour and sustain a traumatic intrusion of otherness, an infinitely proximate (or perpetually vulnerable) self.

In Section 2, dedicated to “Ecocriticism”, **Caren Irr** in her “The Wounded Wood: Contemporary Anglophone Fiction and the Forest” explores the specific and contemporary vulnerabilities of forests as we are beginning to narrate them in widely circulating fictions. Back in 1992, in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, an authoritative treatise on the same subject, Robert Pogue Harrison argued that forests figure in Western literature primarily as sites of refuge and illuminating alterity for human observers. This position now requires reconsideration for two reasons: 1) climate change has reversed the relation of settlements to forests, so that the clearing (an important term for Harrison and, before him, Heidegger) now surrounds the forest rather than vice versa, and 2) scientific discoveries of arboreal dependence on mycorrhizal networks have led to an understanding of forests as linked communicative systems that can carry or perhaps convey their own narratives of crisis. These developments require a revision of the theme of forest as refuge in favour of accounts that pay heed to the vulnerability and flexibility of sylvan spaces. To this end, the essay then turns to contemporary forest



fiction to examine the motifs emerging from this new understanding of forest issues. The scholar isolates three motifs that recur across a group of ten novels from the US, UK, and Canada: the mad father, a fascination with edge zones, and fiery screaming. These motifs congeal into an account of the forest as a space where vulnerable humans rediscover themselves as the agents of violence to other—in this case, vegetal—species. **Dominic Head** in his “Nature Writing and the Aesthetics of Environmental Insecurity” examines the phenomenon of contemporary nature writing—often described as ‘The New Nature Writing’—and its treatment of the psychological impact of impending ecological catastrophe. To show how nature writing has changed in response to the pressures of climate change and ecological collapse, the essay examines the treatment of species (and extinction) in selected texts which reveal an increasing urgency that is a sign of the contemporary. At the same time, the best nature writers have kept their literary heritage and influences in view, adapting and developing styles and techniques to capture this moment. This fusion (or friction) between the zeitgeist and literary form has produced some complex effects, which implicitly question or extend the limits of nature writing. Authors for consideration in this essay, which has a UK-US transatlantic range, include Kathleen Jamie, Neil Ansell, Barry Lopez and Lauret Savoy.

**Rajendra Chetty** starts Section 3, organized around “Ideology”, with his essay entitled “Capitalism, Precarity and Vulnerability in Arundhati Roy’s *My Seditious Heart*”. The scholar argues that Arundhati Roy’s writings offer a powerful commentary on postcolonial India’s oppressive social and economic hegemonies. *My Seditious Heart: Collected Nonfiction* (2019) brings together several of her essays that testify to her anti-capitalist ideologies and interrogation of economic policies and social laws. Two key essays, “The Greater Common Good” and “Capitalism: A Ghost Story” from *My Seditious Heart* represent Roy’s ideological repudiation of the state and global capitalist excesses. Chetty examines Roy’s critique of developmental goals as shaped by the exigencies of larger capitalist forces. The essay exposes a layered politics of precarity unleashed by the neo-colonialist temperament of India. It draws on Judith Butler’s concept of “precarity” and Slavoj Žižek’s observations on “objective” violence. Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “subalternity” and Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of “cultural capital” are also central to Roy’s arguments about the viciousness of India’s capitalist powers and their coercion of the poor and vulnerable. Roy expresses her vehemence against India’s profit-oriented developmental model and attests to the need to reassociate development with political freedom, economic opportunity, and social justice. In “The ‘Vulnerable’ Borders of Britain: Brexit, Eco-Crisis and Building Walls” **Christine Berberich** tackles the topic of ‘vulnerabilities’ from two different angles by closely investigating John Lanchester’s timely novel *The Wall* (2019), which admirably combines the themes of contested borders and eco crisis. The novel deals with the drastic

effects of climate change that sees much of the world being submerged by rising sea waters; Britain has been left more or less intact but politicians have taken ‘precautions’ against an expected influx of desperate migrants whose countries have been submerged by rising sea waters: the country—helpfully already set ‘apart’ by its island status, has been entirely surrounded by a high wall, built with the sole aim of keeping out migrants. The novel highlights the fact that, instead of being strong and proud in its splendid isolation, Britain has become an impoverished country, entrenched in a strict ideology that no longer allows meaningful engagement with the outside world. This paper argues that Britain’s future appears bleak in two ways: on the one hand, it deals with the all-too-apparent climate crisis, spelling out what could be in store for mankind; on the other hand, it can be read as a metaphor for a post-Brexit Britain, literally ‘alone’ and increasingly ‘insular’ in the world, yet simultaneously besieged by outsiders; a country with a deep generational divide, where the younger generation blames its elders for ‘the Change’ that has ruined their lives; a country starved by austerity and a lack of resources. In Lanchester’s *The Wall*, Britain is a country which is vulnerable despite its seemingly strong position, weakened by the very ideology it pursues to strengthen its status in the world. In “Pretend Vulnerabilities: The Masculinist Drive “Forward” in Amis’s Novels and Current Political Discourses” **Cristina Ionica** discusses Martin Amis’s recent fiction, and his focus on the recourse to masculinist structures of power to pretend vulnerabilities as a legitimating strategy in their pursuit of *more* access, enjoyment, and control. The novels analysed in most detail are *The Zone of Interest* (2014) and *Lionel Asbo* (2012), but there is brief reference to some of Amis’s earlier novels (especially *Time’s Arrow* and *Yellow Dog*), as well. The scholar claims that exposure to Amis’s work with masculinist narrative focalization can bolster the readers’ resistance to the increasingly pervasive cognitive framing of objectively vulnerable social categories (such as recent immigrants, racial minorities, LGBT2Q+ individuals, women, at-risk youths, etc.) as universally recognizable threats by the white heteronormative capitalist gerontocratic establishment. These pressures are accompanied by framings of masculinist positions and their supporters as in danger of being silenced, socially excluded, or even eliminated. An examination of Amis’s characters’ discourse is used as a way to illustrate and analyse this trend. Before Brexit, the rise of Trump, and the reappearance of politically powerful extreme right movements throughout Europe, Amis’s obsessive use of masculinist caricatures in his fiction had started to be dismissed by some critics as anachronistic. However, it now looks like the masculinist threat continually enacted in Amis’s novels has been very much real all along.

Ionica’s stress on male-oriented cultural practices is also employed in order to bridge section 3 and 4, dedicated to “Gender”, where **Aimee Pozorski** and **Maren Scheurer** in their joint scholarly work entitled “Philip Roth’s Vulnerable

Women: Trauma and the Ethics of Listening” direct their attention to Philip Roth’s works as a particularly notorious test case for exploring how literary texts create sites of vulnerability to address the ethical treatment of the other, from within a framework drawn from psychoanalysis, feminism, trauma studies, and narrative medicine. Such a reading highlights Roth’s vulnerable women and their acts of rebellion as expressions of the weight of gender politics, coercive sexuality, and sexual assault. Pozorski and Scheurer advocate an analysis of Roth’s “vulnerable women” in the context of a pathological history—a repetitive history of personal, political, and historical trauma. Repositioning Roth’s vulnerable women from his text’s margins to the center of his own ethical project, they interpret acts of listening as an ethical model in the face of trauma.

Section 5, committed to “Anthropocentrism vs. Zoocentrism”, comprises the paper written by **Ruth Maxey** and entitled “‘Strays... who... never really become part of life’: Human and Nonhuman Vulnerability in Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend*”. Here, the scholar concentrates her attention on Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend* (2018), a novel that explores the philosophical questions raised by human-nonhuman relationships through her representation of the intense bond between the unnamed narrator-protagonist, a writer in New York, and Apollo, the harlequin Great Dane she inherits from her late friend, mentor and fellow writer, a British Jewish man, also nameless, who has committed suicide. Dizzily intertextual, the novel engages with an ambitious range of European and American literary and cinematic works. Although critics have regarded J.M. Coetzee’s celebrated novel *Disgrace* (1999) as an especially important thematic influence, Maxey argues that Nunez’s novel bears an even closer resemblance to a very different novel of interspecies encounter: J.R. Ackerley’s *We Think The World of You* (1960). Using a lens of transatlantic intertextuality, the scholar interprets *The Friend*’s critique of anthropocentrism and its depiction of the narrator’s vulnerable position as a single, older, grieving woman, subject to both sexism and ageism, who often feels invisible in the 21st-century society around her. Maxey also argues that Nunez’s formal techniques, including blurred genre boundaries, result in a playfully metatextual, open work of quasi-autofiction. Thus, she reasserts the power of fiction even as her novel explicitly questions the place of literature in a contemporary world of loneliness, isolation and increasing precariousness.

“Apocalyptic Fiction” is the topic discussed in Section 6, where **Heather J. Hicks** in her “‘Stripped of These Things They Were Kin’: Tracking Judith Butler’s Post-9/11 Conception of Vulnerability in Recent Apocalyptic Fiction” focuses her attention on the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and their aftermath, which moved theorist Judith Butler to explore the scope and ramifications of human vulnerability. In her landmark essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (2004), Butler argues that America’s military response to 9/11 underscores that there is no alternative to vulnerability; it is an inescapable condition that every

human experiences. On the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, this essay asks if Butler's perspective regarding vulnerability has taken root more broadly in the years since 9/11. To pursue this question, Hicks examines recent apocalyptic novels by influential writers Naomi Alderman, Omar El Akkad, and Lawrence Wright, all of whom have been deeply shaped by the events surrounding 9/11. Importantly, none of the novels examined—Alderman's *The Power* (2016), El Akkad's *American War* (2017), and Wright's *The End of October* (2020)—is “about” 9/11. Yet each presents these themes in an apocalyptic form that centres the experience of human vulnerability and turns to 9/11 to reckon with this condition. In doing so, the novels draw conclusions that frequently align with Butler's in their acknowledgement of both human vulnerability's variability and its underlying universality. **Diletta De Cristofaro**, author of “Contemporary Literature of the End Times”, also offers a panoramic view of this literary genre. Through a survey of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel—and focussing in particular on Nathaniel Rich's *Odds against Tomorrow* (2013), Karen Thompson Walker's *The Age of Miracles* (2012), Thomas Mullen's *The Revisionists* (2011), and David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004)—the scholar argues that at the core of the genre's typology of end of the world lies a preoccupation with time, specifically, with the critique of traditional apocalyptic time and its central role in western modernity. She traces the shift from the traditional conception of apocalyptic history as a line tending towards betterment to the dystopian visions of the contemporary apocalyptic imagination, reading this shift through the movement from first modernity to reflexive or second modernity (Beck), a movement whereby the very foundations of modernity, including its understanding of time, become problematic. The critic maintains that the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel embodies the shift from first to second modernity by subverting the modern and apocalyptic construction of history through critical temporalities that debunk this construction as just a narrative.

**Arne De Boever's** “Art and Injury in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*: Philosophical Perspectives” is the only contribution in Section 7, dedicated to “Aestheticism”. This paper focuses on the theme of vulnerability in *What I Loved* (2003), a novel by the American novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt. In the novel, Hustvedt, who has a long-standing interest in vulnerability especially in relation to psychoanalysis, initially explores a devastating trauma that ties two families together: the loss of Matthew, the child of one of the two families. Yet, the novel really takes off with its focus on the other family's child, Mark, as it spirals into a psychotic tale of deceit and, ultimately, of death that places the relationship between art and vulnerability front and centre. The critic then elaborates a section of his work dwelling on the topic of ‘the smooth’, intended as the counter-figure of injury, that has become a signature of our time. Hence, the role of vulnerability in Hustvedt's text is analysed in relation to art, within a framework of aesthetic philosophy that questions

beauty and—by extension art’s—association with the smooth. Hustvedt’s text is ultimately used as a touchstone to consider what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han has called an “aesthetic of injury”, as part of a criticism of a contemporary culture of smoothness that the pandemic brutally overturned.

Section 8 is the last in this volume and deals with “Dependance, Care and Affect”. In her “Multiple Vulnerabilities in *Klara and the Sun*”, **Vanessa Guignery** claims that on the very first page of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021), the eponymous character remembers how, when she and her fellow robots were new, they used to worry they would “grow weaker and weaker” for lack of sun. The notion of vulnerability is thereby placed at the core of the novel from the start and, throughout the book, affects not only human beings but also machines, nature and the form of the text itself. *Klara and the Sun* also places vulnerability within a context of interdependence which, as shown by theoreticians, is central to the ethics of care and such related values as solidarity, solicitude and interconnection. As Carol Gilligan, Marianne Hirsch, Joan Troto and Jean-Michel Ganteau (among others) have argued, vulnerability, an ontological condition of human and non-human existence, can be viewed as part of an ethics of relationship and therefore a dynamic force based on the possibility for an empathic opening to the vulnerability of others which is a mirror of one’s own vulnerability. In *Klara and the Sun*, forms of vulnerability and forms of care vary according to one’s position and social status, and the dystopian society depicted in the novel, which may be seen as an allegory of contemporary Western societies, seems to produce vulnerability rather than try to alleviate it. This paper analyzes such a production of vulnerability by exploring the multiple forms of vulnerability in the novel (physical, relational, social, economic, emotional, textual...), focusing on the ethical, social and political scope of the notion. This implies examining the ways in which the concept of vulnerability may be extended to robots. The second paper of this chapter, authored by **Jean-Michel Ganteau** and entitled “No Continent Is an Island: Jon McGregor’s *Lean Fall Stand*”, discusses Jon McGregor’s *Lean Fall Stand* (2021), a work pertaining to human precariousness and ontological vulnerability. It turns its back on the world of excluded addicts and outcasts in *Even the Dogs* (2011) and ties in with the story of personal trauma and attendant incapacitation at the heart of *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006), even while exploring the human subject’s relation to his/her natural environment that is prominent in *Reservoir 13* (2017). *Lean Fall Stand* provides a story of human dependence on the natural environment that partly takes place in Antarctica, echoing contemporary concerns about the climate crisis and showcasing the shift of agency from the human subject to the extreme natural and climactic elements arising from the Anthropocene. The second half of the story takes place in England and presents the physical and social consequences of a stroke that affects the protagonist. It provides a linguistic immersion into the world of partial aphasia and gives experiential, incarnated knowledge of the reality of what it is to be dependent. The link between the apparently separate parts of the narrative pulls on

the thread of vulnerability, in its human and non-human aspects, insisting on the vulnerability of all the living and thereby building up a picture of interdependences, embeddings and entanglements. **Geetha Ganapathy-Doré** brings her consideration to the short story “I cleaned the—” by Sri Lankan author Kanya d’Almeida in her paper “Relational Dynamics in a Care-dependant Family: Kanya d’Almeida’s Short Story “I cleaned the—”. The story revolves around Ishwari and Rita, two elderly women who share their life experiences in the Carmelite Sisters’ Sanctuary for the Forsaken. Though the readers might think that this is the frame story and the story exchanged between them is the main story, the author insists that this is the main story because her intention was to highlight the idea of the story-hearer with the view to underscoring the empathy and the active role of the listener in giving shape to the story. The features of care literature are found in the themes, images and techniques of both the frame and main stories. Disease, disability, old age, and death are dealt with here in a style that tempers pathos with humour. The purpose of the article is to explore the various settings of caregiving depicted in the short story, examine how the ethnic, social and gender hierarchies are upset in a family which holds wealth and power but lacks good health and so consequently is obliged to depend upon a carer from the labouring class, to explain the rivalry that emerges between the biological mother and the carer who develops an affectionate bond with the handicapped girl whose bodily excretions she has been cleaning over twenty years and finally to analyse the poetics of care in Kanya D’Almeida’s narrative. Ultimately, the story is about love, care, compassion, charity and tolerance; in other words, humanity at the service of life. “‘Some Wound or Something’: Kazuo Ishiguro and the Forms of Vulnerability” is the critical work by **Michael Greaney** examining the ways in which vulnerability is represented and negotiated in the fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro from *A Pale View of Hills* to *Klara and the Sun*. It begins by acknowledging the obvious and powerful affinities between Ishiguro’s writings—with their gentle, undemonstrative, vulnerable protagonists—and the strands of modern thought, from psychoanalysis to feminism and to trauma studies, which attach immense significance to experiences of precarity and vulnerability. Ishiguro’s writings are critically self-conscious about their investment in vulnerability, but for all his compassionate attention to damaged and injured selfhood, his fiction also critiques the tendency to fetishize wounds and woundedness. Greaney claims that, rather than simply ‘illustrating’ vulnerability in all its humanizing pathos, Ishiguro’s fiction can be read as a valuably self-aware contribution to recent debate on what has been called the vulnerability of vulnerability. In the final paper of this collection, **my contribution** “Focus on the Inexplicable: an Analysis of John Burnside’s *A Summer of Drowning* and Graham Swift’s *Here We Are*” claims that, in spite of appearances, John Burnside’s *A Summer of Drowning* (2011) and Graham Swift’s *Here We Are* (2020) share a consistent number of common elements. Both narrations prove to be a tough test for the two female narrators who clash against their own inability to appropriately convey their experiences into words. In this paper,

the two narratives are analysed in terms of a mourning after the loss of a dear one: on the one hand, Liv, the narrator in *A Summer of Drowning*, grieves after the loss of Kyrre Opdahl, her old neighbour and possibly her only friend, after he sacrifices his life to prevent his Norwegian village from remaining under the sinister influence of a girl who allures young men to her before they subsequently vanish. On the other hand, Evie White's memories bring her back to reconstruct the episodes which led up to the mysterious disappearance of the magician Ronnie Dean, her former boyfriend, who went missing after performing a spectacular number on stage. Moving from Freud's study on "Mourning and Melancholia", I evaluate the reactions of melancholic subjects, who typically reject the idea of the irrevocability of loss and instead play with fantasies of rejoining a dear one. The theories of Butler, Žižek, Gilson and Berlant are used to further contextualise the melancholic's predicament and position both cases in frame within studies on vulnerability.

With great pleasure, I can stress that the present volume does not reach its conclusion with the last contribution, but, as previously hinted, benefits from the precious collaboration of a guest of honour, American scholar **Erinn Cunniff Gilson**, who joined our team towards the end of the project and has agreed to write a conclusive piece for it. What Gilson so admirably does is to properly set the contours of this animated debate, and therefore provide an appropriate palimpsest for those who are not yet very familiar with this cultural and ethical question, but she also supplies an articulate explanation supporting the view that, as a complex phenomenon, it requires a pluralistic approach, since by its own nature "vulnerability is both ambivalent and ambiguous". (339) It is in this context that her brief essay also offers further stimuli to readers and scholars who already work and write about this topic. More in detail, she moves towards the heart of the matter, focussing on the answers to three key questions: "What matters most about vulnerability? How should we think about and theorize vulnerability? What conclusions can be drawn about vulnerability's ethical significance?" (337)

A final thought goes to my collaborators, and I think it only correct for me to show here my heartfelt gratitude to them, since their complete dedication and generosity was the spark that moved this priceless teamwork. Working in a project supported by a minor publisher is not what academic systems worldwide always encourage. But, then, no one ever said that academia has no vulnerabilities of its own.