

Lecture-seminar 1: Thinking about vulnerability, ancient and modern

Opening questions...

- How normal, or normative, is vulnerability, now, as in the ancient world?
- To what extent is Greco-Roman antiquity constructed in the modern imagination around representation of perfect, beautiful bodies?
- And what is at stake in emphasizing the normality or ubiquity of vulnerability, rather than imagining vulnerability as marking certain bodies in their difference from the healthy, upright, self-sufficient, non-disabled norm?
- Does vulnerability in others elicit our sympathy, or also our disgust? Is it beautiful, or ugly, or both? Why? Do those views change as we get older?
- To what extent is vulnerability associated with shame in our culture? Or even with other kinds of ‘weakness’ – moral, ethical, legal? Is vulnerability gendered?

1.

‘Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war. We cannot, however, will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others.’ Judith Butler 2004, *Precarious Life*, 29.

2.

‘In its radical openness, the vulnerable subject is always encountering and being encountered, moving towards and being moved by others. In that sense, the context where embodied selves move through cannot be reduced either to the rational mind moving the body or the body moving the mind, as dualistic epistemologies would argue. Instead, the embodied self is relational, for better or for worse.’ Urquiza Haas and Arturo Sánchez García. *Conference Proceedings review* 2013.

Seminar

Passage 1: Virgil *Aeneid* 2.705-729

Read the passage from Virgil *Aeneid* 2, in translation. This is the story of the fall of Troy, told in the first person by the leader of the Trojans, Aeneas, before Dido and her guests during the banquet at the queen's palace in Carthage. In the lines leading up to this passage, Aeneas and his family (father Anchises, wife Creusa and son Iulus) are preparing to flee the burning city. The elderly father wants to stay put, but Aeneas declares this unthinkable: he cannot leave him. Creusa and Iulus cling to him and beg him to let them all stay together. As they creep through the shadows, Aeneas is paralyzed by fear. Later, in the chaos, he loses his wife Creusa, and when he returns to look for her he meets her ghost.

1. How might we judge Aeneas' 'weakness' and 'instability' in this passage? Is he behaving like a 'typical Trojan', or like a proto-Roman? Does zooming in on one this moment make us think differently about Roman epic?
2. Rome's foundation myths thematize loss, grief and vulnerability: discuss

He speaks, and now the fire is more audible,
through the city, and the blaze rolls its tide nearer.
"Come then, dear father, clasp my neck: I will
carry you on my shoulders: that task won't weigh on me.
Whatever may happen, it will be for us both, the same shared risk,
and the same salvation. Let little Iulus come with me,
and let my wife follow our footsteps at a distance.
You servants, give your attention to what I'm saying.
At the entrance to the city there's a mound, an ancient temple
of forsaken Ceres, and a venerable cypress nearby,
protected through the years by the reverence of our fathers:
let's head to that one place by diverse paths.
You, father, take the sacred objects, and our country's gods,
in your hands: until I've washed in running water,
it would be a sin for me, coming from such fighting
and recent slaughter, to touch them." So saying, bowing my neck,
I spread a cloak made of a tawny lion's hide over my broad
shoulders, and bend to the task: little Iulus clasps his hand
in mine, and follows his father's longer strides.
My wife walks behind. We walk on through the shadows
of places, and I whom till then no shower of spears,
nor crowd of Greeks in hostile array, could move,
now I'm terrified by every breeze, and startled by every noise,
anxious, and fearful equally for my companion and my burden.

Passage 2: Seneca Letters 56.11-15

Context: Seneca in this letter is testing his own imperviousness to exterior distractions as well as to the 'noise' of a soul that is not at peace. As a negative example of someone (apart from Seneca himself!) who fails this test and is therefore a long way from being a Stoic wise man, Seneca chooses Aeneas. He quotes 4 lines from the end of the *Aeneid* passage we looked at above. For the Stoic, who likes to shock people out of their conventional beliefs, the terrified Aeneas holding onto his son and carrying his father on his shoulders is *not* an image of virtue, care and human fragility, but rather a man who is pathetically ignorant, and who allows himself to be dominated by his emotions.

1. How shocking is Seneca's radical re-contextualisation of Virgil?
2. How do you think Seneca exploits the cultural resonance of 'Greek', 'Trojan' and 'Roman' in this passage?

11. Men think that we are in retirement, and yet we are not. For if we have sincerely retired, and have sounded the signal for retreat, and have scorned outward attractions, then, as I remarked above, no outward thing will distract us; no music of men or of birds can interrupt good thoughts, when they have once become steadfast and sure.

12. The mind which starts at words or at chance sounds is unstable and has not yet withdrawn into itself; it contains within itself an element of anxiety and rooted fear, and this makes one a prey to care, as our Vergil says:

*I, whom of late no dart could cause to flee,
Nor Greeks, with crowded lines of infantry.
Now shake at every sound, and fear the air,
Both for my child and for the load I bear.*

13. This man in his first state is wise; he blanches neither at the brandished spear, nor at the clashing armour of the serried foe, nor at the din of the stricken city. This man in his second state lacks knowledge, and fearing for his own concerns, he pales at every sound; any cry is taken for the battle-shout and overthrows him; the slightest disturbance renders him breathless with fear. It is the load that makes him afraid. **14.** Select anyone you please from among your favourites of Fortune, trailing their many responsibilities, carrying their many burdens, and you will behold a picture of Vergil's hero, "*fearing both for his child and for the load he bears.*" You may therefore be sure that you are at peace with yourself, when no noise readies you, when no word shakes you out of yourself, whether it be of flattery or of threat, or merely an empty sound buzzing about you with unmeaning din. **15.** "What then?" you say, "is it not sometimes a simpler matter just to avoid the uproar?" I admit this. Accordingly, I shall change from my present quarters. I merely wished to test myself and to give myself practice. Why need I be tormented any longer, when Ulysses found so simple a cure for his comrades even against the songs of the Sirens? Farewell.