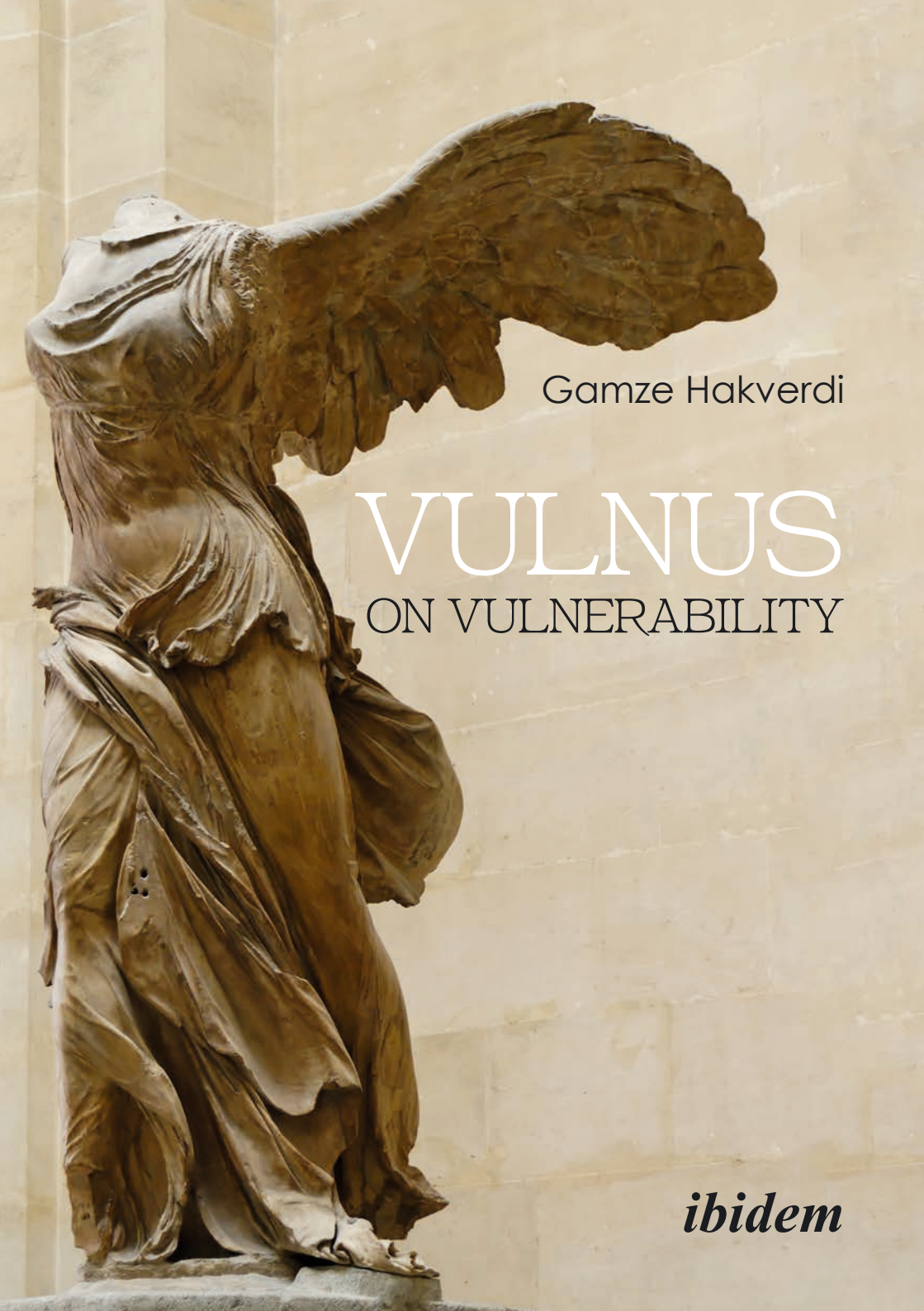


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ON VULNERABILITY

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Preface:
The Voice of the Child and *Aphrodite*

This book, at its core, is an encounter with a ghost. If it were a children's story, I might have illustrated that ghost with one eye as a symbol of the singular gaze of the *Ideal*. That singular gaze, in a more insistent and commanding sense, calls everyone to itself as if to say, "*Look at me, there is nothing else to see but me!*" and, in doing so, flattens the entire visual and symbolic field into a single point of reference. This is precisely why I call it a ghost. Like all ghosts, it forever eludes full resolution. We can never look it directly in the eye; instead, we are captivated by what it projects outward—its glowing decoys and shimmering misdirections. Our attention clings to these surfaces and to what they make visible, and in that very act, we lose sight of the psychic machinery that sustains this gaze and grants it the power to shape what we perceive as reality.

The simple images of ghosts in children's books may be easy to draw; however, the ghosts that exist in real life—those diffuse, persistent forces that influence our inner worlds—resist such simplicity. They cannot be captured in a single stroke or playful outline. They haunt us without being explicitly seen, yet slip between appearances, shaping what we see without ever fully revealing themselves. In this book, I invite you to adopt the stance of a ghostbuster. We will try to trace the contours of the gaze–voice assemblage behind the stories collected in this ethnographic fieldwork. That assemblage, which we will discuss further, creates a fantasy of the *Ideal,* and our goal is to follow its movements without losing sight of how it speaks, how it looks, and how it organizes what can be seen and said.

Pursuing this ghostly thread, we might turn to Hans Christian Andersen's children's story, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1959, 6–32), first published in 1837. There were plenty of ghosts there, too. An emperor, obsessed with fine clothing, is deceived by two weavers who claim to have made a fabric so beautiful that it remains invisible to anyone "unfit for his position or unforgivably stupid." The

intrigued emperor sends two officials to inspect the looms. They see nothing—because there is nothing to see—but neither dares to admit it. Telling the truth could threaten their social image and status, so they pretend to see what is not there. When the emperor visits the workshop, he also notices the emptiness. He wonders, "*Am I stupid? Am I not fit to be Emperor*?" Fear overcomes doubt, and he joins the others in pretending to see the nonexistent fabric. Finally, news spreads that the clothes made from this extraordinary fabric are ready. The emperor is dressed in the imaginary clothes amid exaggerated gestures and empty praise: "*How it suits, Your Majesty! How nicely it fits. What a pattern, such colors! These are elegant clothes!*" A grand procession begins, the streets fill with crowds, faces peek out of windows, and a single collective voice echoes in admiration: "*How marvelous the Emperor's new clothes look!*" Suddenly, the spell is broken. A child's voice cuts through the air: "*But he has nothing on!*" Then the crowd finally finds the courage to admit the truth and echoes the child's words: "*He has nothing on!*"

When the child in Andersen's tale shouts, "*He has nothing on!*" the supposed magic of the invisible fabric instantly collapses. The imperial authority built on that illusion also crumbles, along with its symbolic order. The child has not yet internalized the voice of the Law, the one that commands us to maintain order. The truth he speaks does not come from heroism but from a state in which voice and gaze remain united, unbroken by fear or convention. This story, then, goes far beyond a moral lesson for children; it invites us to question the ideals we have granted an enchanted visibility. After all, the emperor's sovereignty stems not from himself alone but from his crown and the shimmering fabrics that adorn him. The emperor embodies the call, as if it were the call of moral Law, "*Look at me, there is nothing else to see but me!*" and demands our consent and cooperation. His power exists only as long as we participate in the spectacle. The child's voice shatters this spectacle. It breaks the fantasy and reopens the possibility of seeing in another way, beyond dazzling objects of desire and the collective fantasies that uphold authority.

This book discusses vulnerability in direct conversation with what is often seen as its opposite: the *Ideal*, conceived as invulnerable. These ghostly ideals are not external forces floating above us; they are deeply embedded within our subjectivity, sustained by a silent agreement between gaze and voice. Imagine the emperor walking in his supposedly magnificent garments, as if saying, "*Look at me, there is nothing else to see but me!*" and the crowd responding together, "*Look at him, there is nothing else to see but him!*" At this precise moment, gaze and voice establish a pact. Even if this scene is from a children's story, it feels uncannily familiar. The "ghost" here does not represent a repressed truth but the invisible operation of an order. We cannot see it because it influences how we look; we cannot hear it because it speaks in the rhythm of our inner voice. Vulnerability, when reflected upon in this way, opens a path to a different kind of ethics of seeing and listening that allows us, even if only for a moment, to regain the child's clarity in Andersen's story—a clarity born of an openness to the Other, unclouded by a shared fantasy.

This book is based on field research I conducted in Italy and Türkiye in 2016, as part of my doctoral dissertation. Although nearly a decade has passed, I still believe the questions it raises are as relevant as ever for two reasons. First, the idea of ideality I examined through a psychoanalytic lens persists. In fact, we might say it has expanded its mechanisms for ensuring our compliance. The gaze that influences our subjectivity is no longer only the gaze of the Other, as it appears in various forms, such as social order, law, parental figures, or moral norms. It has been joined, and in some cases replaced, by what Liran Razinsky (2025) calls the "algorithmic gaze." Razinsky emphasizes that the vast quantities of data gathered about us, when analyzed alongside others', make us increasingly transparent to the algorithmic gaze. Deeply interpretive, this gaze does not merely "look" but "reads," translating our traces into predictions and patterns. Razinsky describes this as "informational incontinence," a state in which we unknowingly leak ourselves outward. As algorithms improve at reading us, our subjectivity becomes more transparent, as if our inner lives were quietly exposed to a system that interprets us beyond our awareness and

perhaps without our consent. In this context, Razinsky's insights encourage us to reflect on the ghostly ideals we inherit from culture as they continue to extend and intensify their reach. This regime does not replace the symbolic gaze of the *Ideal*; it reinforces it, creating a new, data-driven form of ideality that demands our compliance not through spectacle or voice but through predictive legibility. In this way, vulnerability today involves not only our openness to being affected by the Other's gaze, as a foundational part of the symbolic order, but also our readability by algorithms.

The stories of vulnerability shared with me during my fieldwork were not merely nostalgic memories; they were living testimonies that resonate even more today. In a world where, as Razinsky points out, our inner lives have become measurable, comparable, and permanently exposed, the Other we face is both organic and algorithmic. It is a composite gaze formed as much by human relationships as by the systems that read and rank us. The ideality, as I explore in this book, that positions the subject as "too much" or "not enough" has become increasingly numerical. It now depends on visibility metrics and efficiency scores to quantify the individual. Think of the endlessly flickering forms of ideality that fill social media, along with the constant updates and trends that come and go in the blink of an eye. Our subjectivities, readable and exposed, have become more permeable. We are more open to the Other, and in that openness, more vulnerable than ever.

The second reason I find this book still relevant concerns the scale of the phenomenon I observed. The stories I collected in Italy and Türkiye are no longer limited to those two contexts; they have, in a sense, become part of a global infrastructural flow. Today, the networks of communication, data, and visibility shaping our lives influence subjectivity in increasingly similar ways across regions. These infrastructures that promise *connection* also create a regime of resemblance. Within this expanded landscape, ideals travel easily, translated into different languages and accents yet governed by the same underlying grammar. This algorithmic grammar increasingly determines what is considered *ideal* and what is marked as *vulnerable*. It not only reorganizes space but also subtly reshapes time. Digital infrastructures continuously measure and evaluate the

present, erasing the depth and texture of temporal experience. Human rhythms, such as change, hesitation, deviation, failure, and even the simple act of losing one's way, disappear into the seamless flow of updates and metrics. "Progress" and "success" no longer refer to a gradual, meaningful movement toward a goal; instead, they reflect our ability to keep pace with the tempo of the algorithmic stream. In this context, the vulnerabilities I documented years ago have not diminished; they have intensified. They now circulate within an infrastructural ground that encompasses us all, transforming the conditions under which we see, are seen, and under which we listen and are listened to. It is within this transformed landscape, where visibility has become a global currency and ideality a circulating code, that the ghosts moving through these pages take on their full meaning. These infrastructures do not merely surround us; they seep into us and become a vital part of our psyche. They will continue to evolve and shape the very fabric of our subjectivity. But at what cost, and within what limits? We do not yet know, but we will learn as we live within their reach.

What is certain, though, is that we cannot return to a world without them. That world, which we might sometimes feel nostalgic for, now exists only in our archives, museums, and libraries. It appears as distant memories, stories, and possibilities. That is why *Aphrodite*, who has so far remained behind the curtain of this text, must finally step onto the stage. *Aphrodite*'s story might lead us to rediscover the knowledge of vulnerability, for she is not only the goddess of beauty but, as Raffaella Arpiani (2024, 11–23) suggests, the goddess of openness to the Other and of vulnerability itself. Arpiani examines one of humanity's earliest encounters with vulnerability through Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos*. This statue, often cited as the first fully nude female figure in Western art history, marks a major milestone. It depicts a female figure engaged in an intimate, everyday, and private gesture. She reaches for a veil with her left hand, or perhaps places it over a water jar. With her right hand, she gently twists her wrist to shield her naked body, capturing the exact moment when self-awareness and exposure meet. By freezing this transitional moment, Praxiteles depicts vulnerability not as a sudden break but as a subtle, relational movement within

a negotiation between visibility and the presence of the Other's gaze.

In Praxiteles' era, sculptures depicted gods and goddesses, expressing religious devotion and bringing the divine into view. As Arpiani explains, Praxiteles' revolutionary contribution was not only his magnificent representation of a fully nude female figure—a first in Greek history—but also his humanization of the divine. His *Aphrodite* is not the distant, untouchable goddess of classical perfection; she is shown in a tender moment, frozen in the pause before or after a ritual bath. The gesture of her left hand, reaching for or letting fall a veil, and the slight turn of her right wrist as she covers herself, reveal an instant awareness of being watched by an invisible Other. This reflects an instinctive reaction, much like the one we naturally have when caught by another's gaze in a private moment, before conscious thought takes over.

Arpiani (2024, 11–23) reminds us that this sculpture emerged in the wake of profound moral and philosophical crises, and in that sense, its context was not very different from our current world. The Peloponnesian War had left Greek city-states weakened, while the lingering trauma of the devastating plague (430 BCE) had shattered Athens' confidence, fostering a shared sense of abandonment, confusion, and despair. In that climate of disillusionment, the Olympian gods people had long invoked now appeared indifferent—or perhaps powerless to intervene—and with that, people began to feel their fate slipping beyond their control. The symbolic order appeared shaken. It is precisely at this moment that art intervenes, not to restore an idealized past but to serve as a truthful mirror reflecting humanity itself. By carving the goddess in an intimate moment, just as humans experience, Praxiteles created a figure through which Athenians could see their own condition and perhaps even feel a renewed sense of connection with the gods. In doing so, he transformed sculpture from a symbol of transcendence into a medium that exposes, within a single figure, both divine ideality and human vulnerability.

Praxiteles preferred sculpting in marble rather than bronze, which was more commonly used at the time, to achieve a finish that closely resembles human skin. Unlike bronze, marble was heavy,