



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Melodrama or metafiction? Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/126344/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Santovetti, O (2018) Melodrama or metafiction? Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels. *Modern Language Review*, 113 (3). pp. 527-545. ISSN 0026-7937

<https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.113.3.0527>

---

(c) 2018 Modern Humanities Research Association. This is an author produced version of a paper published in *Modern Language Review*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## Abstract

The fusion of **high** and **low art** which characterises Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels is one of the reasons for her global success. This article goes beyond this formulation to explore the sources of Ferrante's narrative: the 'low' sources are considered in the light of Peter Brooks' definition of the **melodramatic mode**; the 'high' component is identified in the **self-reflexive, metafictional** strategies of the **antinovel** tradition. Particular attention is given to the reflection on the act of **writing** (four metaphors are discussed). The Neapolitan Novels are presented as self-reflexive texts: a 'postmodern' **novel of formation** of a writer who while narrating thinks about the writerly process and what it means to be a writer, particularly a **woman writer** today.

Melodrama, according to Peter Brooks' famous formulation, is 'a mode of heightened dramatisation inextricably bound up with the modern novel's effort to signify'.<sup>1</sup> Originated in the popular tradition of the pantomime, developed in the theatre, melodrama found fertile ground in the literary genre of the novel which was reaching its peak in the nineteenth century. In Brooks' exploration of the works of Balzac and Henry James, the 'melodramatic imagination' combines the categories of 'novel' and 'romance' (if we adopt the distinction of the Anglo-American tradition) by operating halfway and taking from both: its subject – the ordinariness of life – from the former and its strategies from the latter ('quest, escape, and fall-expulsion-redemption are in fact all structures that can be classed in the general category

---

1 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1976), p.ix. For a more specific definition see pp.11-12: 'The connotations of the word [melodrama] are probably similar for us all. They include: the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, final reward of virtue inflated and extravagant expressions, dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety'.

of romance (in Northrop Frye's term)').<sup>2</sup> This brings Brooks to argue that melodrama is not confined to popular entertainment, but is in fact a pervasive presence in the novel even in its most compelling experimentations (as he brilliantly demonstrates in the case of Henry James). His book was pioneering in challenging the idea of a cultural hierarchy and made critics rethink how low and high cultural forms are intertwined. In this study I will argue that *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) can be used today as a critical platform to understand the extraordinary success of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels. Ferrante's works not only aptly fit Brooks' definition but can be seen as updating it with a postmodern twist, by which the melodramatic mode acquires a distinctive metafictional layer.

### **'Un grande melodramma'?**

Elena Ferrante had been a writer for almost twenty years (her debut novel *L'amore molesto* was in 1992) when in 2011 she published *L'amica geniale*, the first of four volumes which was to make her an international literary sensation both in terms of commercial success (translated into more than 50 languages, 5.5 million copies sold worldwide<sup>3</sup>) and of critical acclaim.<sup>4</sup> The elements of continuity and novelty between the Neapolitan Novels and Ferrante's earlier works were pointed out as early as 2012 when the second volume of the series came out: continuity, notes Laura Benedetti, was mainly thematic (the city of Naples; the dichotomy between language and dialect; the focus on female relationships); the

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.30.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Alter, "'Ferrante Fever' continues to spread', *The New York Times*, 7 December 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/arts/ferrante-fever-continues-to-spread.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/arts/ferrante-fever-continues-to-spread.html?_r=0) [accessed 1 January 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Starting from James Wood's seminal review on *The New Yorker*, 'Women on the Verge', 21 January 2013 (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/women-on-the-verge> [accessed 1 January 2018]), which sanctioned the international fame of Ferrante, the first of a long list of articles and reviews on American and English literary journals and media outlets dedicated to the Neapolitan Novels. This critical appraisal led to Ferrante being nominated by *Foreign Policy* in 2014 as one of the world's global leading thinkers and included in *Time's* 100 Most Influential People of the year for 2016; her last volume of the Neapolitan quartet, *Storia della bambina perduta* was nominated for the Strega prize and in the UK shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize as well as for the Best Translated Book Award. On Ferrante's success in America see Laura Benedetti, 'Elena Ferrante in America', *Allegoria*, 73 (2016), pp. 111-17, and Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love, 'Introduction: Beyond the Margins: "Ferrante Fever" and Italian Female Writing', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.1-12.

element of novelty is primarily in the narrative pace and structure which now accommodate a large-scale fresco; *L'amica geniale* – says Benedetti – marks the passage 'dalla storia privata ad un affresco epocale in cui vengono tratteggiati non solo rapporti interpersonali ma anche i cambiamenti di un quartiere napoletano dal dopoguerra alla soglia degli anni Sessanta'.<sup>5</sup> The broader scope – and more complex structure – was accompanied by the serialisation which distinguished her new work. With the second volume, *Storia di un nuovo cognome* (2012), reviewers openly remarked on the similarities between Ferrante's novel and the *feuilleton* or nineteenth-century melodrama. Beatrice Manetti in her review on the *Indice dei libri del mese* for December 2012 brought the attention to the repertoire of tricks or narrative devices at work in Ferrante's novel, including 'il vecchio trucco da *feuilleton*' of the found manuscript: in this case the box of Lila's notebooks which at the beginning of *Storia di un nuovo cognome* allows Elena the narrator to tell the story from the point of view of her friend (we might also note the many coup de théâtre, the cliffhanger ending with the sudden appearance of Nino, who launches a defence of Elena in the heated discussion at her book launch in the finale of the volume).<sup>6</sup> Another review on the same page of *Indice* refers to the 'trucco del *feuilleton*' as a broader category by which the author, Rossella Milone, means serialisation itself through which Ferrante's story captivates the attention of the readers and secures their loyalty.<sup>7</sup> Serialization is a powerful device of contemporary cinema and television, so much so that the Neapolitan Novels are said to be in debt also to the contemporary

---

5 Laura Benedetti, 'Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città: *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante tra continuità e cambiamento', *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 2, 2012, 171-87 (p.171).

6 Beatrice Manetti, 'Due di due', in *L'indice dei libri del mese*, n.12, December 2012, p.13: [*Storia di un nuovo cognome*] inizia in un giorno di primavera del 1966, quando Lila consegna ad Elena una scatola con otto quaderni. [...] Nel vecchio trucco da *feuilleton*, la cui funzione principale è appunto quella di riprendere il filo del racconto, risuona allora una domanda allarmante [...]: a chi appartiene questa storia'.

7 Rossella Milone, 'Il trucco del *feuilleton*', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, n.12, December 2012, p.13: 'Una storia che si allunga nel tempo cattura la curiosità del lettore e, soprattutto, lo fidelizza'.

successor of the *feuilleton*, that is the TV series, the soap-opera, the graphic novel, and the film melodrama.<sup>8</sup>

The Neapolitan Novels as 'un grande melodramma – o se si preferisce, un grande *feuilleton*', were the subject of an entire essay by Raffaele Donnarumma. The Italian critic suggests that the melodramatic quality of Ferrante's work is the key to understand both her extraordinary success as well as the negative reaction that her novels received from a section of the Italian academia.<sup>9</sup> Tiziana de Rogatis reinforces this point in her introduction to the recent *Allegoria* volume dedicated to Ferrante (which features, among others, Donnarumma's essay). The introduction, with the telling title 'Chi ha paura di Elena Ferrante?' ['Who is afraid of Elena Ferrante?'] ponders why when the debate on Neapolitan Novels was spreading internationally, with conferences and events organised in US and UK universities and scholarly volumes published abroad, Ferrante's works had been ignored, when not openly dismissed, in Italian universities (the *Allegoria* volume edited by de Rogatis in 2016 had the intention of addressing this silence).<sup>10</sup> A case in point was the polemic caused by the nomination for the 2015 Strega prize of the last volume of the series, *Storia della bambina perduta*. Among the others, Renato Barilli, Emeritus professor of the University of Bologna, an eminent critic of the 'gruppo 63', wrote a hostile review in his blog entitled 'Perché non si deve premiare la Ferrante' and pointed the finger to 'una scrittura che scorre via priva di nerbo, di carattere, con una pletora di personaggi che tentano di rimediare col numero a una

---

8 Laura Buffoni, 'Elena Ferrante sono io', *Internazionale*, 30 November 2014: 'Nel caso di Elena Ferrante questi strumenti artigiani sono forgiati sulla tradizione "pop": il *feuilleton*, il romanzo d'appendice; e, naturalmente, sui suoi eredi a noi più vicini: il melodramma, il fotoromanzo, la soap opera, la serie tv'. <http://www.internazionale.it/opinione/laura-buffoni/2014/11/30/elena-ferrante-sono-io> [accessed 1 January 2018].

9 Raffaele Donnarumma, 'Il melodramma, l'anti-melodramma, la Storia: sull'*Amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante', *Allegoria*, 73, 2016, 138-147 (p.138): 'Inutile girarci attorno: *L'amica geniale* è un grande melodramma – o se si preferisce, un grande *feuilleton*. Stanno in questo molte ragioni sia del suo successo di pubblico, sia dello sfavore con cui l'ha giudicato una parte dell'accademica soprattutto italiana'.

10 Tiziana de Rogatis, 'Chi ha paura di Elena Ferrante?', *Allegoria*, 73, 2016, 109-10.

piattezza di eventi'.<sup>11</sup> A similar argument had been already used by Paolo Di Paolo in *Il corriere della sera* when in 2014 he puzzled over Ferrante's success abroad writing disparagingly of her 'trame oliate' and comparing them to a popular Italian soap, *Un posto al sole*.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, both reviews focused on the *feuilleton* quality of Ferrante's work. This, of course, is not unusual: mixing with forms of popular entertainment has often been seen with suspicion, if not open disdain. The writer Elsa Morante found herself at the centre of a similar controversy with *La Storia*, which was a literary sensation in Italy forty

---

11 Renato Barilli, 'Perché non si deve premiare la Ferrante', 26 February 2015:

<http://www.renatobarilli.it/blog/perche-non-si-deve-premiare-la-ferrante/> [accessed 1 January 2018].

A continuation of this polemic can be found in the recent article by Stefano Jossa, 'Perché non si deve studiare Ferrante all'università', *Doppiozero*, 20 May 2017

(<http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/non-si-deve-studiare-la-ferrante-alluniversita> [accessed 1 January 2018]). Jossa does not comment on Ferrante's works but instead targets the scholars who study Ferrante at university. According to Jossa 'tanta critica accademica [...] lavora oggi col cuscino sulla faccia del proprio oggetto. Mi scuso per la metafora, ma la situazione di gran parte della critica è proprio questa: non conta il partner (l'oggetto del mio studio), ma la performance e il suo risultato (la mia ostentazione e il mio successo)'. The misogyny of this metaphor (a pillow over the face of a woman) is hard to miss. This is not an isolated reaction to Ferrante's success (see the debate stirred after Claudio Gatti's article on Ferrante's identity on *The New York Review of Books*, 2 October 2016; in particular, the article by Jeanette Winterson, 'The malice and sexism behind the 'unmasking' of Elena Ferrante', *The Guardian*, 7 October 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/07/unmasking-elena-ferrante> [accessed 1 January 2018]). After all, the subtlety (but also the sincerity) with which Ferrante in the Neapolitan Novels has made readers, female and male alike, experience the misogyny of our society is one of the reasons of her global appeal.

12 Paolo Di Paolo, 'Il caso Ferrante, il romanzo italiano secondo il *New Yorker*', *Il corriere della sera*, 13 October 2014: <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/10/13/cultura/il-caso-ferrante-il-romanzo-italiano->

years ago. Published in 1974, Morante's novel sold more than 600,000 copies within months and provoked a heated debate: its detractors saw *La Storia* as a 'romanzo', a nineteenth-century *feuilleton* out of time.<sup>13</sup>

Donnarumma's article explains very effectively how the Neapolitan Novels exemplify Brooks' definition of melodrama as the aesthetic of excess: behind the banalities of quotidian existence, there is a world of radical passions 'che non possono restare sepolte nell'interiorità ma debbono sempre sboccare nell'agire [...]. Tutto è estroflesso' says Donnarumma.<sup>14</sup> The representation, the drama, is never adequate for carrying what is behind the passions that drive the characters. What Brooks noted for the novels of Balzac and Henry James applies here: '[t]here is a constant effort to overcome the gap, which gives a straining, a distortion, a gesticulation of the vehicles of representation in order to deliver signification'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed many of the features of the melodramatic mode can be found in the Neapolitan Novels. Donnarumma in particular dwells on the melodrama's capacity to account for the variety of the social spectrum (all social classes are represented in the Neapolitan Novels) and for the characters' mobility (the story follows the successful and unsuccessful attempts at social climbing), and on the central role played by recognition as a typical plot strategy.

---

[secondo-il-new-yorker-k6z6crdyRB5A6Z4ycRUrIO/pagina.html](https://www.new-yorker-k6z6crdyRB5A6Z4ycRUrIO/pagina.html) [accessed 1 January 2018]

13 For example 'Contro il romanzo della Morante' written by Nanni Balestrini, Elisabetta Rasy, Letizia Paolozzi, Umberto Silva, *Il manifesto*, 18 July 1974, p 3, where the 'romanzo' is further described as 'elegia della rassegnazione' and Morante disparagingly grouped among the 'bamboleggianti nipotini di De Amicis' and Rossana Rossanda's article, 'Una storia d'altri tempi', *Il manifesto*, 7 August 1974, p.3. The debate surrounding *La Storia* is discussed in Stefania Lucamante, 'Le Lacrime: Morante and Her Critics', in *Forging Shoah Memories in Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.153-63.

14 Donnarumma, p.139.

15 Brooks, p.199.

Interestingly, Donnarumma's analysis ends up arguing that within the 'grande melodramma' of Ferrante, there is an opposite element, an anti-melodrama drive, that sabotages its own structure and deprives it of resolution: no happy ending, no order is re-established and there is no final reward for the 'virtuous' character.<sup>16</sup> This tension, I believe, captures precisely the novelty of Ferrante's 'melodramatic' project: that is the capacity – or 'intelligenza creativa', to use the words of Tiziana de Rogatis – 'di immettere i materiali dell'intrattenimento e della letteratura di consumo (quei “fondali bassi” di cui parla nella *Frantumaglia*) in una forma complessa, non residuale, ma al contrario sintonizzata con un bisogno antropologico dei nostri tempi' (here de Rogatis makes a poignant comparison to the analogous method of Elsa Morante with *La Storia*).<sup>17</sup> I will argue that this 'forma complessa', this combination of the nineteenth-century *feuilleton* with postmodern narrative strategies, this 'fusion of high and low art' as a reviewer of *The Economist* aptly defined it, is one of the reasons for her great success among the Anglo-American critics who have greeted her as 'a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Dickens':

From a literary perspective, Ms Ferrante's approach is masterly. She uses the melodramatic tropes of soap opera to tell a cracking good story, all the while smuggling in piercing observations, like a file baked in a cake. Her work is reminiscent of a Neapolitan theatrical tradition called *sceneggiata*, a kind of over-the-top musical melodrama about honour, betrayal and crime. Through this fusion of high and low art, Ms Ferrante emerges as a 21st-century Dickens, with readers clamouring for the next instalment at the shops.<sup>18</sup>

---

16 Donnarumma, p. 143: 'Elena Ferrante sceglie insomma il *feuilleton*, si appropriava delle sue leggi con ostinazione, e lo sabota, contestando l'illusione che esso ingenera: e cioè che nella vita tutto torna, tutto si ricompatti, tutto acquisti un senso'.

17 Tiziana de Rogatis, 'Metamorfosi del tempo. Il ciclo dell'*Amica geniale*', *Allegoria*, 73, 2016, 123-37 (p.128)

18 'Ties that bind. A four-volume feminist novel from Naples has become an unlikely global hit', *The Economist*, 27 August 2015, <https://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21662488-four->

If the 'low' sources of Ferrante's art have been amply discussed and criticised (Ferrante herself frequently acknowledged her debt to the popular novel<sup>19</sup>), there is much to say about her ability and originality in using a series of sophisticated and experimental narrative strategies belonging to the 'high' tradition of the novel. My aim in this article is to bring the attention to the metafictional, self-reflexive dimension of the Neapolitan Novels: an aspect that I see as pervading Ferrante's later works but which has not yet received enough critical attention (although in Italy scholars have highlighted crucially important elements: Elisa Gambaro on the use of the unreliable narrator; and Caterina Falotico on the metanarrative structure<sup>20</sup>). Indeed, the Neapolitan series can be read as a novel of formation – and, postmodernly, de-formation – of a writer who while narrating ponders, explains, and exposes the very act of writing, its mechanisms, and what it means to be a writer, particularly a woman writer today.<sup>21</sup> For

---

volume-feminist-novel-naples-has-become-unlikely-global-hit-ties-bind [accessed 1 January 2018]

19 Elena Ferrante, 'Il vapore erotico del corpo materno. Risposte alle domande di Marina Terragni e Luisa Muraro' in *La frantumaglia* (Rome, Edizioni e/o: 2012), pp.210-18 (p.217): 'Il fotoromanzo è stato uno dei miei primi piaceri di lettrice in erba. Temo che l'ossessione di ottenere un racconto tesissimo, anche quando narro una storia piccola, mi venga da lì. Non provo alcun piacere a scrivere, se non sento che la pagina è emozionata. Una volta avevo grandissime ambizioni letterarie e mi vergognavo di questa spinta verso tecniche da romanzo popolare. Oggi mi fa piacere se qualcuno mi dice che ho scritto un racconto avvincente – per esempio – come quelli di Delly'.

20 See Elisa Gambaro, 'Il fascino del regresso. Note su *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante', *Enthymema*, XI, 2014, pp.168-181; Caterina Falotico, 'Elena Ferrante: Il ciclo dell'*Amica geniale* tra autobiografia, storia e metaletteratura', *Forum Italicum*, 49 (2015), 92-118. See also the reviews of Simona Micali, 'La scrittura e la vita', *L'Indice dei libri del mese*, December 2014 and the above-mentioned reviews by Manetti and Milone.

21 On the specific challenges faced by the woman writer see Mona Simpson, 'Elena Ferrante Writes Fiction That Feels Autobiographical. But Who Is She?', *The New Republic*, 10 October 2014,

this reason in this article I propose to analyse them as self-reflexive books with all the nuances of metafiction, metanarrative and autofiction.<sup>22</sup> I will argue that this self-reflexivity contributes to the masterly fusion of high and low art that makes Ferrante's work so compelling.

## 2. A story about writing

Let us start by analysing the importance of writing in the symbiotic relationship between the two main characters: Elena and Lila. The reflection on writing appears most frequently in the framing chapters, that is those chapters at the beginning or at the end of the chronological blocks into which the story is divided: Prologue, Childhood, Adolescence, Middle Time, Maturity, Old Age, Epilogue. It is not surprising that it is in the chapters which link key passages of the story that we find the narrator pausing and turning her attention from the narrated events to the act of narration, from the story to the reasons behind writing her story. A good example is the following passage from the Prologue:

Lila come al solito vuole esagerare, ho pensato.

Stava dilatando a dismisura il concetto di traccia. Voleva non solo sparire lei, adesso, a sessantasei anni, ma anche cancellare tutta la vita che si era lasciata alle spalle.

Mi sono sentita molto arrabbiata.

Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta, mi sono detta. Ho acceso il computer e ho cominciato a scrivere ogni dettaglio della nostra storia, tutto ciò che mi è rimasto in mente. (AG 18-19).<sup>23</sup>

---

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119727/elena-ferrantes-those-who-leave-and-those-who-stay-reviewed> [accessed 1 January 2018]; on female subjectivity and authorship see the excellent essay by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 'Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Writing Liminality', *Allegoria*, 73, 2016, 204-10.

22 See my introduction to *Self-reflection in Italian Literature*, *The Italianist*, 35, 3 (2015), 309–17.

23 From hereafter references to Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels will be given in the text with the following abbreviations: AG: *L'amica geniale* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2011); SNC: *Storia del nuovo*

The narrator openly admits that she began to write after, or rather because of Lila's disappearance. She writes to bring Lila back – in more than one sense. Writing is a form of resistance against the obliteration of memory – by disappearing Lila also wanted to eliminate the life that she had left behind, their life together ('cancellare tutta la vita che si era lasciata alle spalle'). But writing is also a way to defy her friend, to challenge her one more time ('Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta'), which is also a form of revenge. Therefore, from the very beginning we are informed first about the symbiotic and competitive nature of this friendship, and, secondly, about the pivotal role played by writing.

It is important to note, however, that this reflection on writing does not appear only in the framing chapters but permeates the whole dynamic between the two friends. We should not forget that it is the dream of becoming writers, inspired by the reading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which they read for months ('a mente, l'una vicina all'altra, o a alta voce', AG 64), that cemented the friendship and set the story in motion.<sup>24</sup> The symbolic value of this dream, which Ferrante spells out in an interview, is self-evident: it is 'una via di fuga', their way out from the neighbourhood and what it meant (the ignorance, the misery, the violence of their childhood).<sup>25</sup> However it 'will prove a way out only for

---

*cognome* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2012); SFR: *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2013); SBP: *Storia della bambina perduta* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2014).

24 But see also AG 66: 'Pensammo che studiare molto ci avrebbe fatto scrivere libri e che i libri ci avrebbero rese ricche. La ricchezza era sempre un luccicore di monete d'oro chiuse dentro innumerevoli casse ma per arrivarci bastava studiare e scrivere un libro. "Ne scriviamo uno insieme" disse Lila una volta e la cosa mi riempi di gioia. Forse l'idea prese piede quando lei scoprì che l'autrice di *Piccole donne* aveva fatto così tanti soldi che aveva dato un po' delle sue ricchezze alla famiglia'.

25 Elena Ferrante, 'Rimango nell'ombra perché contano i libri e mai i loro autori', di Paolo Mauri, *La Repubblica*, 21 settembre 2012: 'In realtà ho usato *Piccole donne* perché volevo che con i soldi dell'Orco delle favole le due bambine acquistassero un libro che indicasse loro una via di fuga'.

Elena';<sup>26</sup> the one who wins the scholarship to Pisa and later will start a career as a writer.<sup>27</sup> For Lila, forced to quit school by her father, writing will become problematic.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, once grown up, writing is what divides the two friends. On the one side there is Elena the writer, on the other there is Lila the non-writer: the one who, in spite of writing beautifully (a dazzling example, we are told, is the short story *La fata blu*), deliberately gave up writing (symbolically, by giving Elena the metal box with her notebooks at the beginning of Volume 2). And yet the more Lila rejects writing the more she pervades the writing of Elena, she become the 'pungolo [...] necessario': 'Voglio che lei ci sia, scrivo per questo. Voglio che cancelli, che aggiunga, che collabori alla nostra storia rovesciandoci dentro, secondo il suo estro, le cose che sa, che ha detto o che ha pensato' (SFR 91). She is the goad that pushes Elena to write, but which at the same time makes her always more dissatisfied, because she can never close the gap. But which gap?

The gap – I suggest – is that between writing and life. While Elena wrote novels, Lila lived life – or 'created a novel' with real people, with real blood: 'il romanzo' says a Lila introjected inside herself,

---

26 Dayna Tortorici, 'Those Like Us: On Elena Ferrante', *n+1*, Issue 22, Spring 2015,

<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-22/reviews/those-like-us/> [accessed 1 January 2018]: 'In elementary school, Lenù is mesmerized by a "book" Lila writes called *The Blue Fairy*—a story written on a few pages of graph paper bound with a dressmaker's pin. They read *Little Women* together and make a plan to write a novel and get rich. Writing, they imagine, will be their way out of the neighbourhood. But writing will prove a way out only for Lenù'.

27 SNC 327: 'Io, Elena Greco, la figlia dell'usciera, a diciannove anni stavo per tirarmi fuori dal rione, stavo per lasciare Napoli. Da sola'.

28 On the different effect produced by *Little Women* on the individual life of the two friends see Gambaro, p.172: '*Piccole donne* [...] rappresenta per Elena il primo pungolo verso la faticosa conquista di un'*autorialità* femminile, ovvero della dimensione pubblica e sociale della scrittura; per Lila segnerà l'inizio di un destino di frustrazioni dolenti e furibonde battaglie alla ricerca di un'identità sempre sfuggente'.

'l'ho fatto con le persone vere, col sangue vero, nella realtà' (SFR 285). This gives Lila an authenticity that seems to be always eluding Elena. And indeed Elena's nightmare, particularly in the final volume, has to do with the eventuality of Lila finally writing her novel, the perfect novel capable of capturing the authenticity of reality, a memorable novel:

Di tanto in tanto prendevo uno dei miei volumi, leggevo qualche pagina, ne avvertivo la fragilità. Le mie incertezze di sempre si potenziarono. Dubitai sempre di più della qualità delle mie opere. Invece il testo ipotetico di Lila, in parallelo, assunse un valore imprevisto. Se prima ci avevo pensato come a una materia grezza su cui avrei potuto lavorare insieme a lei, cavandone un buon libro per la mia casa editrice, ora si mutò in un'opera compiuta e quindi in una possibile pietra di paragone. Mi sorpresi a domandarmi: se presto o tardi dai suoi file verrà fuori un racconto di gran lunga migliore dei miei? Se io davvero non ho mai scritto un romanzo memorabile e lei, lei invece, lo sta scrivendo e riscrivendo da anni? Se il genio che Lila aveva espresso da bambina con la *Fata blu*, turbando la maestra Oliviero, adesso, in vecchiaia, sta manifestando tutta la sua potenza? In quel caso il suo libro sarebbe diventato – anche solo per me – la prova del mio fallimento e leggendolo avrei capito come avrei dovuto scrivere ma non ero stata capace. (SBP 437)

Somehow the hypothetical book of Lila, the non-writer, would mean the annihilation of Elena's own work as a writer, it would be the proof of her failure. This passage touches a nodal point of the reflection on writing to which I will return at the end. I will start now to unravel the origin of Elena's dissatisfaction by comparing the reflections on writing found in the Neapolitan Novels with a series of metaphors about the act of writing which I see underlying the essays collected in the volume *La frantumaglia*.

### 3. Metaphors of Writing

Before moving on to the metaphors, the concept of 'frantumaglia' needs to be clarified ('la frantumaglia'

is both the title of a long letter-essay written in 2003 by Ferrante in response to the questions by two editors of *Indice dei libri del mese*, Giuliana Oliviero and Camilla Valletti, and the title of the volume which collects twenty years of letters, essays and interviews published in 2007, then republished in 2016 as an expanded edition, also translated into English). In the 2003 essay Ferrante explains that 'frantumaglia' is a dialect word used to describe a feeling of suffering that cannot be traced to a single obvious cause, a sense of loss, of splitting apart:

Mia madre mi ha lasciato un vocabolo nel suo dialetto che usava per dire come si sentiva quando era tirata di qua e di là da impressioni contraddittorie che la laceravano. Diceva che aveva dentro una frantumaglia. La frantumaglia (lei pronunciata *frantumàglia*) la deprimeva. A volte le dava capogiri, le causava un sapore di ferro in bocca. Era la parola per un malessere non altrimenti definibile, rimandava a una folla di cose eterogenee nella testa, detriti su un'acqua limacciosa nel cervello. [...] La frantumaglia è un paesaggio instabile, una massa aerea o acquatica di rottami all'infinito che si mostri all'io, brutalmente, come la sua vera e unica interiorità. La frantumaglia è il deposito del tempo senza l'ordine di una storia, di un racconto.<sup>29</sup>

Two points arise from this quote. First, the similarity with the phenomenon of 'smarginatura' ('dissolving margins') experienced by Lila and described on a few occasions in the Neapolitan Novels: a sensation of reality collapsing, losing its margins, showing in its brutality what it really is and leaving the subject traumatised, fearful, and exhausted. This is what happens to Lila at the New Year's party in Volume 1 when 'il profilo amato' of her brother loses consistency, breaks down his outlines and 'la materia si espanse come un magma mostrandole di che cosa era veramente fatto' (AG 172).<sup>30</sup> 'Frantumaglia' and

---

<sup>29</sup> *La frantumaglia*, pp.94-95.

<sup>30</sup> For 'smarginatura' see also the episode of the earthquake in Volume 4, *Storia della bambina perduta*, chapters 49-55, in particular the following passage: 'Usò proprio smarginare. Fu in quell'occasione che ricorse per la prima volta a quel verbo, si affannò a esplicitarne il senso, voleva che capissi bene cos'era la smarginatura e quanto l'atterriva. Mi strinse ancora più forte la mano, annaspando. Disse

'smarginatura' are not quite the same thing (as pointed out by Laura Benedetti, the former is 'la manifestazione di un malessere', while the latter refers 'alla percezione della realtà al di là delle apparenze, in una sorta di epifania'<sup>31</sup>), and yet in both instances we are witnessing moments of crisis in which the subject is confronted with the magma underneath. The second thing to note is the self-reflexive implication of the last sentence of the quote – 'La frantumaglia è il deposito del tempo senza l'ordine di una storia, di un racconto' – which clearly alludes to the power of narration ('racconto') to give order and meaning to the chaos, the magma underneath. This power of narration is what emerges but also what is brought into question in the metaphors of writing which I am about to analyse.

### 1. Writing 'as if I were butchering eels':

[...] quando scrivo, è come se macellassi anguille. Bado poco alla sgradevolezza dell'operazione e uso la trama, i personaggi, come una rete stretta per tirare dal fondo della mia esperienza tutto quello che è vivo e si torce, compreso ciò che io stessa ho allontanato il più possibile da me perché mi pareva insopportabile.<sup>32</sup>

Writing is the recovery of the unbearable, the unpleasant: what is 'impronunciabile e che perciò tacciamo persino a noi stesse' – adds Elena, the fictional writer, echoing Elena the real writer in a quote from Volume 3, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*.<sup>33</sup> Writing pulls up from the depths 'tutto quello che è vivo e

---

che i contorni di cose e persone erano delicati, che si spezzavano come il filo del cotone. Mormorò che per lei era così da sempre, una cosa si smarginava e pioveva su un'altra, era tutto uno sciogliersi di materie eterogenee, un confondersi e rimescolarsi' (SBP 161-2).

31 Benedetti, 'Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città', p.178.

32 *La frantumaglia*, pp.217-8.

33 SFR 53: 'Mi imbarazzai, forse arrossi, affastellai motivazioni sociologiche. Solo alla fine parlai della necessità di raccontare in modo franco ogni esperienza umana, anche – sottolineai – ciò che pare

si torce', the unpleasant, the 'molesto', a very Ferrantian word, from her first novel, *L'amore molesto*, translated as *Troubling Love*. 'Molesto' is however not only 'troubling' but also 'disturbing': what has been repressed and now comes to the surface to haunt the self. 'The dynamics of repression and the return of the repressed' – to return to Brooks' formulation – 'figure the plot of melodrama'.<sup>34</sup> Then Ferrante's metaphor – writing as 'if butchering eels' – is straight melodrama; particularly if we interpret melodrama, as Brooks does in his reading of Henry James, as 'fiction that turns around the problem of the pregnant void or abyss, sounding its depths in the effort to know what is unknowable but which nonetheless confers upon the knowable its charge of meaning and affect'; hence the overcharged gestures of melodrama, that both indicate and mask the abyss, or, to use again Brooks' formulation, from Henry James' quote, 'the thing hideously *behind*, the latent lurking horror, concealed by manners, yet just visible through them'.<sup>35</sup>

2. Writing as 'surveillance'. In 'La frantumaglia' Ferrante writes that the protagonists of her first novels – Delia in *L'amore molesto* and Olga in *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002) – are 'donne che esercitano una sorveglianza consapevole su se stesse'. The concept of 'sorveglianza', Ferrante adds, must be spelled out, because it has ambivalent meanings:

La parola sorveglianza è stata malamente segnata dai suoi usi polizieschi, ma non è una brutta parola. Ha dentro il contrario del corpo ottuso dal sonno, è metafora ostile all'opacità, alla morte. Esibisce la veglia, l'essere vigile, ma senza appellarsi allo sguardo, bensì al gusto di sentirsi in vita. I maschi hanno trasformato il sorvegliare in attività di sentinella, di secondino, di spia. La sorveglianza invece, se bene intesa, è piuttosto una disposizione affettiva di tutto il corpo, un suo

---

impronunciabile e che perciò tacciamo persino a noi stesse. Quelle ultime parole piacquero, ripresi quota'.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, p.201.

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, p.178 and p.195.

distendersi e germogliare sopra e intorno.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of being badly tarnished by its police use, 'sorveglianza' in Ferrante's discourse has a positive connotation: that of being vigilant ('essere vigili'), feeling alive ('sentirsi in vita'). Clearly Ferrante is attracted by this concept and likes to dwell on its nuances (the quote is an extract of a much longer passage). At the end, she goes back to her protagonists and says: 'Mi piacciono molto le donne vigenti che sorvegliano e si sorvegliano proprio nel senso che sto cercando di dire. Mi piace scriverne. Le sento eroine del nostro tempo. Delia e Olga' – and we could add Elena and Lila – 'le ho inventate così'. That being watchful, vigilant, surveillant, is connected to the critical exercise of writing does not come as a surprise: 'Per Olga scrivere è resistere e capire. La scrittura non ha coloriture magiche e mistiche, al massimo è bisogno di stile'. In fact, 'Olga alla fine scopre che il dolore non ci sprofonda né ci eleva e conclude che non c'è niente né in alto né in basso che possa consolarla'.<sup>37</sup> Hence, writing as a therapeutic, redeeming activity is not comforting, is never a consolation. Similarly in the Neapolitan Novels: thanks to writing Elena is able to leave behind the violence and misery of her childhood, but there is no happy ending; in fact it is her profession, her being a writer, which keeps alive that sense of dissatisfaction, permanent, and agonizing which is the leitmotiv of the last volume, *Storia della bambina perduta*.

3. Writing 'as if it were a matter of dividing up the booty'. This is another crucial metaphor, through which we get closer to the core of novelistic writing. Here is the passage (from 'Scrivere nascostamente. Lettera a Goffredo Fofi'):

Sono abituata a scrivere come si trattasse di ripartire un bottino. A un personaggio attribuisco un tratto di Tizio, a un altro una frase di Caio; riproduco situazioni in cui si sono veramente trovate persone che conosco o ho conosciuto, mi rifaccio a esperienze “vere”, ma non per come si sono realmente compiute, piuttosto assumendo come “veramente accaduto” soltanto le impressioni o le

---

<sup>36</sup> *La frantumaglia*, p.98.

<sup>37</sup> *La frantumaglia*, pp.72-73.

fantasticherie nate negli anni in cui quell'esperienza fu vissuta. Così ciò che scrivo è pieno di riferimenti a situazioni ed eventi realmente verificatisi, ma riorganizzati e reinventati come non sono mai accaduti.<sup>38</sup>

Ferrante here spells out a dynamic which is not new in itself: it is the process of transfiguration of reality at the core of any artistic creation. However, in the novel the boundaries between fiction and reality are notoriously ambiguous, so the position of the subject who writes becomes crucial:

Più resto lontana, quindi, dalla mia scrittura, più essa diventa quello che vuole essere: un'invenzione romanzesca. Più mi avvicino, ci sono dentro, più il romanzesco è sopraffatto dai dettagli reali, e il libro smette di essere romanzo, rischia di ferire innanzitutto me come il resoconto malvagio di un'ingrata senza rispetto.<sup>39</sup>

This overlapping between life and fiction is a complex issue. Paradoxically, the anonymity of Ferrante ensures that these differences between fiction and reality, which she was so keen to mark in the above passage, end up vanishing precisely because the position of distance or closeness of an anonymous writer is not assessable nor measurable. As Tiziana de Rogatis has pointed out, anonymity 'consente ai lettori un'infinita attribuzione delle vicende narrate dalla sua stessa vita', thus establishing 'un nesso strettissimo tra identità segreta e finzione narrativa' (this is in spite of Ferrante's declared intention to go in the opposite direction, that is towards 'la valorizzazione del testo scritto, autonomo e superiore rispetto all'io empirico che lo ha prodotto').<sup>40</sup> This overlapping of real life and fiction, on one hand mesmerises

---

<sup>38</sup> *La frantumaglia*, p.55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Tiziana de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy. La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano*, in *Made in Italy e cultura. Indagine sull'identità italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Daniele Balicco (Palermo: Palumbo, 2015), pp. 288-317 (p.295).

the reader (de Rogatis believes that this 'fantasia di *memoir*, che assimila tutta la scrittura di Elena Ferrante ad una continua estesa autobiografia' constitutes one of the main reasons for Ferrante's global success);<sup>41</sup> on the other, particularly in the Neapolitan Novels, it is constantly thematised, and drags the reader into a reflection on a key issue of novel writing. At times this self-reflexive dimension emerges explicitly. For example, in the passage below which is a portrayal of the author at work, using (and showing) her tricks: this is towards the end of Volume 4, at the beginning of the section 'Vecchiaia. Storia del cattivo sangue'. Elena Greco is relating how she came to write her latest novel, *Un'amicizia*:

Così successe che nella primavera del 2006, chiusa in un vecchio albergo di Corso Vittorio Emanuele per colpa di una pioggia che non smetteva mai, scrissi per ingannare il tempo, in pochi giorni, un racconto di non più di ottanta pagine ambientato al rione e che raccontava di Tina. Lo scrissi velocemente per non darmi tempo di inventare. Ne vennero pagine secche, diritte. La storia si impennava fantasiosamente solo nel finale.

Pubblicai il racconto nell'autunno del 2007 col titolo *Un'amicizia*. Il libro fu accolto con grande favore, si vende ancor oggi molto bene, le insegnanti lo consigliano alle alunne come lettura per l'estate.

Ma io lo detesto.

Solo due giorni prima, quando era stato trovato il cadavere di Gigliola ai giardinetti – una morte per infarto, in solitudine, terribile nel suo squallore –, Lila mi aveva fatto promettere che non avrei mai scritto di lei. Invece, ecco, lo avevo fatto, e lo avevo fatto nel modo più diretto (SBP 230-1)

This is a straight *mise-en-abîme*: the story of Tina is the one we real readers are reading, that is the story of the lost daughter; the friendship of the title is the one between Elena and Lila. This means that the fictional story of Elena Greco – *Un'amicizia* – and the novel written in reality by Elena Ferrante that we

---

<sup>41</sup> de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy*, p.289.

are about to finish – *Storia della bambina perduta* – are the same thing (a part from the fact that the fictional story is 80 pages long whereas the novel of Ferrante considered as a whole is 1600 pages). From the passage emerges another interesting fact: that Elena, the narrating self is ill at ease with her novel; in fact, she hates it, 'lo detest[a]', because is the proof that she has betrayed her friend, who, lest we forget, made her promise 'che non [avrebbe] mai scritto di lei'. Instead, here, she had written about her, and she had done it in the most direct way. So Elena has ransacked, to use the metaphor of the booty, the life of her friend to provide material for her writing; she got rich (we are told that the book 'vende ancor oggi molto bene') making spectacle of her life. The uneasiness of the narrator is now passed on to us, the readers, who are left to ponder the ambiguous boundary between fiction and reality – when indeed does a book stop being a novel and become the malicious account of an 'ingrata senza rispetto'?

4. Writing as exhibition/exposition of the self. Let us move on to the fourth metaphor, which in fact is a direct consequence of the previous one (though all of them are connected). This passage comes from the last volume, shortly after the disappearance of Lila's daughter. Elena here meets again, after many years, the son of her high-school teacher who is now a television journalist.

'Perché ti sei messo a fare questo lavoro?'.

'Per lo stesso motivo per cui tu fai il tuo'.

'Cioè?'.

'Da quando non mi posso nascondere dietro a niente, ho scoperto che sono vanitoso'.

'Chi ti dice che sono vanitosa anche io?'.

'Il confronto: la tua amica non lo è. Ma mi dispiace per lei, la vanità è una risorsa. Se sei vanitoso stai attento a te e alle tue cose. Lina è senza vanità, perciò s'è persa la figlia'. (SBP 325-6)

The exchange is rapid but nails Elena to the exhibitionist dimension behind the act of writing; tellingly, she neither denies nor replies. Instead we listen to Armando giving a positive spin to this exhibitionism:

'la vanità', he says, 'è una risorsa', a form of vital energy which Lila lacks. This metaphor of writing as a form of exhibitionism is everywhere in the four volumes, but it has different nuances: it can be for example 'bisogno di approvazione' (SBP 391); or 'spettacolo' (SFR 308) and vulnerability of the self ('Ora io ero lì, *esposta*, e vedermi mi dava in petto colpi violenti' SFR 42, Ferrante's emphasis). This vulnerability brings us back to the metaphor of the 'bottino', because the operation – dividing up the booty – runs the risk of wounding not only the others but also herself, 'rischia di ferire innanzitutto [lei]' the subject that writes, who exhibits but also exposes herself. The metaphor of writing as exhibition/exposition of the self is a recurring theme in Ferrante's writing. In the last section of the above-mentioned 'La frantumaglia' (entitled 'Abiti femminili') the writer makes an enticing parallel between the art of writing and the art of dressmaking. Elena Ferrante as a child remembers the 'malia' which enchanted her while watching the mother, a seamstress, handling the new fabric: 'Mia madre con spilli, con ago e con filo, le avrebbe dato una forma, la forma precisa di un corpo, lei era capace di fare corpi di stoffa'.<sup>42</sup> Watching the mother casting her spell, imagining the bodies behind the cloth, putting on for fun and secretly wearing the dresses of her mother's clients 'donne bellissime di grande prestigio, ma morte', the daughter '[s]'introducev[a] in loro, le calzav[a] ben bene, e dav[a] vita alle loro avventure' and was, in a way, training to be a writer, learning to build characters, to 'fare corpi' with the words.<sup>43</sup> That for Ferrante one art mixes into the other becomes apparent in the description of the same scene in *L'amore molesto*. Delia describes the work of the mother, a seamstress ('mi incantava che da ordito e trama del tessuto lei sapesse ricavare una persona, una maschera che si nutriva di tepore e odore, che pareva figura, teatro, racconto') using words that in a self-reflexive crescendo allude quite openly to the art of narration: 'ordito', 'trama', 'figura', 'teatro', 'racconto'.<sup>44</sup> The job of the seamstress, as that of the writer, pivots around an ambiguous dimension: 'La stoffa', wonders the perplexed daughter in 'La frantumaglia', 'veniva modellata a colpi di forbici sul corpo vivo, per colpirlo? O a colpi di forbici era il

---

<sup>42</sup> *La frantumaglia*, p.145.

<sup>43</sup> *La frantumaglia*, p.146.

<sup>44</sup> Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* in *Cronache del mal d'amore*, (Rome, Edizioni e/o: 2012) p.159.

corpo vivo che veniva denudato? Oscillavo tra queste due fantasie e guardavo mia madre'.<sup>45</sup> Instead of protecting or hiding, the action – whether sewing or writing – ends up striking, unmasking, in short exposing the body/self.

The strength of these metaphors – it should be by now clear – is not so much in their originality, but rather in their ambivalence, always being the result of a tension between two contrasting impulses, 'due fantasie'. These metaphors are ambivalent because it is the act of writing that is inherently ambivalent. Writing fiction, says Elena the know-it-all, means to give shape and order to the chaos, means 'far sembrare coerente ciò che non lo è' (SBP 246). It takes Lila, her brilliant friend, her double, to remind her that this order, this coherence, is a lie, a fiction, and that underneath there is a void, with reality collapsing, dissolving, breaking into pieces. Writing, in particular writing fiction has therefore a dual power: it can normalise, reassure, compromising the authenticity of reality, or, on the contrary, as Elena grasps all of a sudden, it can 'mimare la banalità scoordinata, antiestetica, illogica, sformata, delle cose' (SBP 292).<sup>46</sup> The fear of not being able to capture life in its authenticity is what torments Elena, hence the obsession with Lila's perfect but hypothetical novel, the one capable of unmaking all she had ever written. The mastery of Ferrante is in having created a world which contains and asserts them both: the surveillance, the orderliness of Elena, the writer and the fracture, the magma of Lila, the non-writer. From the complex relationship of Lila and Elena to the metaphors of writing, I hope to have shown how

---

45 *La frantumaglia*, p.147. On the act of cutting and reconstructing clothes in *L'amore molesto* see also

Tiziana de Rogatis, 'Metamorphosis and Rebirth: Greek Mythology and Initiation Rites in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante*, pp.185-206.

46 On the dual power of fiction see also what the writer replies to Nicola Lagioia in the interview

"'Elena Ferrante sono io': Nicola Lagioia intervista la scrittrice misteriosa", in *La frantumaglia*, pp.354-70 (p.362): 'Non credo [...] che tutte le finzioni che orchestriamo siano buone. Aderisco a quelle sofferte, quelle che nascono dopo una crisi profonda di tutte le nostre illusioni. Amo le cose finte quando portano i segni di una conoscenza di prima mano del tremendo, e quindi la consapevolezza che sono finte, che agli urti non reggeranno a lungo'.

important the self-reflexive dimension is and how sophisticated the texture of Ferrante's narration is, a mix indeed of melodrama and metafiction: a story that reads as a page turner, with its well oiled-plots and melodramatic tricks, all the while making us confront the 'frantumaglia', the abyss (the Jamesian 'thing hideously *behind*' in Brooks' formulation) within ourselves and, simultaneously, keeping us reflecting on the dual power of writing and on the tension between writing and life, the written world and the unwritten world – to use Italo Calvino's famous formulation – which is at the core of literary discourse.

#### **4. Conclusion: novel, metanovel, antinovel**

A last remarkable example of this self-reflexivity can be found in the self-portrayal of the writer in the text. A self-reflection both in the sense of metafiction (that is a text that reflects on itself) and 'autofiction' (a reflection of the self of the writer). Elena Ferrante portrays herself in Elena Greco, the successful writer who in the novels enjoys the celebrity status which Ferrante, the real writer, denies herself; however, with a stroke of genius, she is also, unquestionably, Lila, the one who carries out the mission of disappearance ('cancellarsi era una sorta di progetto estetico') so rigorously enacted by Ferrante in real life.<sup>47</sup> This means, as Ferrante points out in a 2014 interview with Rachel Donadio in *The New York Times*, that it is only together that Elena and Lila capture their author: 'Not in the specific events of their lives [...] but in the movement that characterizes their relationship, in the self-discipline of the one that continuously and brusquely shatters when it runs up against the unruly imagination of the other'.<sup>48</sup> That is, the exposition/exhibition of the self is counteracted by its disappearance, its absence.

---

47 SBP 433: 'Quell'idea di cancellarsi l'aveva espressa spesso, ma a partire dalla fine degli anni Novanta – soprattutto dal 2000 in poi – diventò una sorta di ritornello sfottente. Era una metafora, naturalmente. Le piaceva, vi aveva fatto ricorso nelle circostanze più diverse, e non mi venne mai in mente, nei tanti anni della nostra amicizia – nemmeno nei momenti più terribili seguiti alla scomparsa di Tina –, che pensasse al suicidio. Cancellarsi era una sorta di progetto estetico'.

48 'Writing Has Always Been a Great Struggle for Me. Q and A: Elena Ferrante', *The New York Times*, 9

Once again what we find compelling is the ambivalent interpenetration: 'the self-discipline' of Elena and the 'unruly imagination' of Lila. For the sake of opposition, and because she firmly rejects it, I have described Lila as the non-writer, but she clearly contributes as much as Elena to the act of writing. Lila is the goad that keeps Elena narrating and keeps her constantly dissatisfied. Lila, in other words, is the fracture in Elena that cannot be domesticated, her inconvenient truth.

Transposed in narrative terms the opposition Elena-Lila can be seen to represent two different patterns of narration, both at work in the Neapolitan Novels. As Simona Micali notes:

Ecco allora che in contrasto con un modello di narrazione ordinata, coerente, naturalmente dotata di senso, il modello di Elena insomma, viene delineandosi un “modello di Lila”, ossia l'ideale di un realismo tormentato, coraggioso onesto, proprio nel dichiarare i propri limiti; ed è questo ideale che trasforma una trama ad altissimo potenziale romanzesco (ricca di eventi, personaggi, colpi di scena, conflitti e passioni violente) in un racconto volutamente, esibitamente, antiromanzesco'.<sup>49</sup>

The 'modello Lila', a digressive, centrifugal, 'smarginato' model – the antinovel within the 'romanzone' – brings us back full circle to the starting point, that is the anti-melodrama within the melodrama noted by Donnarumma, the idea of the Neapolitan Novels as a *feuilleton* which keeps sabotaging itself, with endings that don't give closure and orders that are not re-established. In fact, the only firm point in this magmatic world is the constant feeling of dissatisfaction of the subject/character who writes, the duo Elena-Lila, who keeps pondering, reflecting, tormenting – as I hope I have demonstrated – on the very process of writing and its relationship with life. The Neapolitan Novels are therefore as much melodrama (or 'romanzesco'), intended as the 'low' source of the novel, as metafiction, intended as the

---

December 2014: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/10/books/writing-has-always-been-a-great-struggle-for-me.html?mcubz=3> [accessed 1 January 2018]; republished with the title 'Never Lower your Guard. Answers to questions from Rachel Donadio' in *Frantumaglia. A Writer's Journey*, translated by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), pp.249-57 (p.257).

49 Simona Micali, 'La scrittura e la vita', *L'Indice dei libri del mese*, December 2014, p.18.

'high' core of the novel epitomised by the experimental tradition of the antinovel (which goes from the pioneers of the genre, Cervantes, Laurence Sterne to the postmodern practitioners, including, in the Italian tradition, Italo Calvino). What matters is to preserve the complexity, to ensure that one element, one model, does not override the other and vice versa. Ferrante states this clearly in an interview in *The Paris Review*:

I think of literary tradition as a single, large depository, where anyone who wants to write goes to choose what is useful to him. An ambitious novelist has a duty, now more than ever, to have a vast literary culture. We need to be like Diderot, the author of both *The Nun* and *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* – capable, that is, of reusing both Fielding and Sterne. I renounce nothing that can give pleasure to the reader, not even what is considered old, trite, vulgar, not even the devices of genre fiction. As I was saying, what makes everything new and valuable is literary truth. If a novel has that – and no trick of marketing can do the job – it needs nothing else, it can continue on its way, drawing its readers along, even, if necessary, into its opposite, the antinovel.<sup>50</sup>

Ferrante's project, in its composite articulation as novel-metanovel-antinovel, is not so distant (in terms of poetics rather than of style) from the idea of the hypernovel proposed by Calvino in *Il conte di Montecristo* as 'romanzo in negativo', that is of a novel that contains and accounts for its own negation.<sup>51</sup> While Calvino's hypernovel – *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) – aims to represent the potential multiplicity of reality including all discarded variants, Ferrante's novel stages the residual

---

50 'Elena Ferrante, *Art of Fiction* No. 228'. Interviewed by Sandro and Sandra Ferri, *The Paris Review*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6370/art-of-fiction-no-228-elena-ferrante> [accessed 1 January 2018]. Now reprinted with the title 'Women Who Write. Answers for questions from Sandra, Sandro, and Eva' in *Frantumaglia*, pp.258-90 (pp.269-70.)

51 Italo Calvino, *Il conte di Montecristo*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, Bruno Falcetto, and Claudio Milanini, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1991–4) vol. II, pp.344-56 (p.355).

dimension of writing, the element that slips away, that denies itself, that resists.<sup>52</sup> Lila acts this out in a key scene of Volume 2, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, when, armed with a roll of black paper and a large pair of scissors, she takes fierce pleasure ('felicità feroce') in disfiguring the photo panel of herself in her wedding dress, thereby portraying 'la furia contro se stessa, l'insorgere, forse per la prima volta nella sua vita, del bisogno [...] di cancellarsi'.<sup>53</sup>

This dramatic, overcharged gesture of self-mutilation is the gesture that best captures the paradox of writing that emerges through the four metaphors: making visible the disappearance, narrating the erasure, writing the element that denies itself. This is a quintessentially melodramatic gesture, because it reaches through to the 'thing hideously *behind*' (as Brooks/James put it) and also the most ambitious, because the melodramatic mode here says something more universal about the art of writing in its aim to say the unsayable. (After all, even the rarefied and geometric postmodern structures of Calvino were meant to suggest the void underneath, the horror *behind*). However, the 'felicità feroce' that Lila feels while disfiguring her portrait tells us something more: her gesture is felt by herself, and by the readers, to be liberating and empowering (Katrin Wehling-Giorgi acutely described the disfiguring as 'a creative

---

52 The parallel must be taken with a pinch of salt: for both writers the 'antinovel' is a way to rehabilitate the novel as a genre but while Calvino devices a modular structure, Ferrante revisits, and brings new energy to, the nineteenth century format.

53 SNC 122: 'Presto mi tornò in mente il verbo usato da Michele: scancellare. Probabile, sì, probabilissimo che le strisce nere finissero di fatto per isolare le scarpe e renderle più visibili: il giovane Solara non era stupido, sapeva guardare. Ma a tratti, sempre più intensamente, sentii che non era quello il vero obiettivo del nostro incollare e colorare. Lila era felice, e mi stava trascinando sempre più nella sua felicità feroce, soprattutto perché aveva trovato di colpo, forse senza nemmeno rendersene conto, un'occasione che le permetteva di rappresentarsi la furia contro se stessa, l'insorgere, forse per la prima volta nella sua vita, del bisogno – e qui il verbo usato da Michele era appropriato – di cancellarsi'.

process [...] reminiscent of the act of writing and the agency that comes with authorship<sup>54</sup>). This is because she owns it, she is the one performing the 'smarginatura', which is her way of asserting her subjectivity and autonomy. As Stiliana Milkova pointed out, 'In cutting and concealing her body, she invalidates her own self-objection, nullifies her body modeled on fashion magazines. In this way, she also destroys the wedding dress and what it represents: marital abuse and subjugation'.<sup>55</sup>

In a game of mirrors and self-reflection, the self-mutilating scene not only throws light on Lila's disappearance in the Neapolitan Novels (as well as on the many woman characters who disappear in Ferrante's fiction) but also reveals the stance behind Ferrante's decision to remain anonymous, to disappear, so to speak, behind her books:

The disappearance of women should be interpreted not only as giving up the fight against the violence of the world but also as clear rejection. There is an expression in Italian whose double meaning is untranslatable: "Io non ci sto." Literally it means: I'm not here, in this place, before what you're suggesting. In common usage, it means, instead: I don't agree, I don't want to. Rejection means shunning the games of those who crush the weak.<sup>56</sup>

Writing the disappearance, in the bodily, melodramatic world of Ferrante's fiction is the vigilant, self-aware "Io non ci sto" of the woman writer addressed to patriarchal society.

Olivia Santovetti

---

<sup>54</sup> Wehling-Giorgi, p.208.

<sup>55</sup> Stiliana Milkova, 'Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics: Ekphrasis in *Troubling Love*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Story of a New Name*', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante*. pp.159-82 (p.175).

<sup>56</sup> Ferrante, 'The Magma Beneath the Conventions. Answers to questions from Elissa Schappell', in *Frantumaglia*, pp.321-27 (p.327).

University of Leeds

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

[o.santovetti@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:o.santovetti@leeds.ac.uk)