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Illuminating the Chaos and Obscurity: Polyphony in Fyodor Dostoevsky and Elena Ferrante

ARTICLES - COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article brings into dialogue the nineteenth-century Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky and the twenty-first-century Italian novelist Elena Ferrante. As well as sharing thematic similarities in their fiction, such as poverty, violence and social disorder, Dostoevsky and Ferrante both place significant emphasis on the role of the writer, through their fictional narrators and in autobiographical writings. Drawing on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, we analyse the way in which Dostoevsky and Ferrante use polyphonic techniques to address their shared preoccupation with the artifice of narrative and their concern for authentic writing. We ask the following questions: How do Dostoevsky and Ferrante approach the paradox inherent in the creation of a narrative—an artificial construct—for the purpose of communicating a truth? What kind of writing do they consider authentic, and what is the nature of the human experience that authentic writing should expose? Given that Ferrante's novels prioritise female protagonists, how does her use of polyphony compare to that of Dostoevsky, a writer who has at times been criticised for his portrayal of women and for the violence enacted against them in his fiction? Beginning with examples drawn from across the oeuvre of both authors, our analysis will culminate in a parallel reading of Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent* and Ferrante's latest novel *The Lying Life of Adults*.

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INTRODUCTION

This article brings into dialogue the nineteenth-century Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky and the twenty-first-century Italian novelist Elena Ferrante.[1] Ferrante is one of the most critically acclaimed and popular novelists on the global stage today (*My Brilliant Friend* tops the *New York Times* list of the 100 best books of the twenty-first century),[2] and she has acknowledged a debt to Dostoevsky. There is an enduring global interest in the Russian author and ongoing discussion in the field as to the nature of his contemporary significance,[3] so it is timely to consider his lasting impact and legacy in the landscape of world literature, using Ferrante as an example. As well as sharing thematic similarities in their fiction, such as poverty, violence and social disorder, Dostoevsky and Ferrante both place significant emphasis on the role of the writer, through their fictional narrators and in autobiographical writings. Drawing on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, in this article we analyse the way in which Dostoevsky and Ferrante use polyphonic techniques to address their shared preoccupation with the artifice of narrative, and their concern that authentic writing should reveal to readers a "first-hand knowledge of the terror" (Ferrante, *Frantumaglia* 373). We ask the following questions: How do Dostoevsky and Ferrante approach the paradox inherent in the creation of a narrative—an artificial construct—for the purpose of communicating a truth? What kind of writing do they consider authentic, and what is the nature of the human experience, dubbed "the terror" by Ferrante, that authentic writing should expose? Given that Ferrante's novels prioritise female protagonists, how does her use of polyphony compare to that of Dostoevsky, a writer who has at times been criticised for his portrayal of women and for the violence enacted against them in his fiction?[4] Beginning with examples drawn from across the oeuvre of both authors, our analysis will culminate in a parallel reading of Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*[5] and Ferrante's latest novel *The Lying Life of Adults*. While being mindful of the different historical, social and cultural contexts in which the writers operated, we concentrate on their stylistic and conceptual affinities, which transcend temporal and geographical distances. We contend that by reading Dostoevsky and Ferrante alongside each other, we gain a deeper insight into the connection between existential and artistic concerns in the works of each author, as well as an understanding of how these concerns are co-opted by Ferrante for a feminist agenda.

To date, only one other comparative analysis of Dostoevsky and Ferrante exists: Yuri Corrigan's psychoanalytic reading of demonology and selfhood in the two authors. Our article therefore builds on this platform to consolidate Dostoevsky–Ferrante studies as a fruitful area of inquiry, breaking new ground by offering a sustained analysis of Ferrante's latest novel through a Dostoevskian lens. While it is beyond the scope of our study to conduct a feminist critique of Dostoevsky, it also extends gendered applications of Bakhtin in literary analysis which have hitherto primarily focused on Anglophone texts.[6]

Ferrante acknowledges her debt to Dostoevsky in several places. In *My Brilliant Friend* Elena and Nino start to court each other through their shared love of literature: "I asked him what he was reading. I told him what I was reading. We talked about our reading" (*My Brilliant Friend* 217). The text in question is Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: this book is the matchmaker, the intermediary that brings them together over their passion for reading and separates them from the others, in this case Nino's sister, Marisa, who "burst in, shouting 'Stop it, who cares about this Dostoevsky, who gives a damn about the Karamazovs'" (217). But Ferrante does care about the Karamazovs; the mention of this specific novel is an indication of the concerns that Dostoevsky and Ferrante have in common, since *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's last, longest and arguably most complex novel, is among other things a reflection on the nature of telling stories. The novel's characters become narrators, tell stories and put forward narratives that compete with each other. In doing so they also highlight the fiction, or artifice, that results from imposing a narrative order on human ideas and experiences. Dostoevsky had a lifelong preoccupation with the difficulty of bridging the gap between thought and authentic expression, a difficulty he saw perfectly encapsulated in a line from the poem "Silentium!" (1830) by his contemporary Fyodor Tyutchev: "A thought once uttered is untrue" (278).[7] *The Brothers Karamazov* was his most sustained attempt to overcome this conundrum.[8] It provides a sophisticated example of polyphony, the multi-voiced characteristic first identified by Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Essentially, Dostoevsky's oeuvre is a continuous exploration of the relationship between form and content. Ferrante's works also dwell heavily on this relationship, and in *My Brilliant Friend* she uses Dostoevsky as a metonym for the issue.

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[1] Quotations from all works will be given in English, taken from published translations except where stated, where we have used our own translation. Russian is transcribed from the Cyrillic according to the Library of Congress transliteration system without diacritics. In the main body of the text, we have adopted a less formal system for proper names and therefore use "Fyodor Dostoevsky" rather than "Fedor Dostoevskii". In citations of sources that use an alternative system, that system is kept.

[2] "The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century". There is now a rich and solid body of scholarly contributions on Elena Ferrante's works: for an inclusive list of all the scholars and publications, see the bibliography compiled by the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing at the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies.

[3] The bicentenary of Dostoevsky's birth was celebrated in 2021, generating a number of events and publications such as Bowers and Holland. Subsequent to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Dostoevsky has featured heavily in debates about the role of Russian culture in imperialism. See, for example, Zabuzhko, Yermolenko. While acknowledging the seriousness of these debates, it is beyond the remit of this article to take part in them; however, Hudspith has written elsewhere on this issue ("Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness").

[4] The question of Dostoevsky's attitude to women has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Some critics read him as misogynistic and/or find his female characters lacking in the nuance typical of his male characters. See, for example, Andrew, Heldt, Murav. Others offer a more positive analysis, such as Briggs and Strauss.

[5] The original title is *Podrostok*. In other translations the title has been variously rendered as *A Raw Youth* and *An Accidental Family*. *The Adolescent* has historically received somewhat less critical attention than Dostoevsky's other major novels, but this situation is changing. For studies that devote attention to the novel's chaotic form and narrative structure, see, for example, Catteau, Egdorf, Harrington, Jones, Kasatkina, Matzner-Gore.

[6] See, for example, Bauer, Bauer and McKinstry, Stone.

Ferrante elaborated on this in an interview with Ruth Joos, collected in *Frantumaglia*. The interviewer asked Ferrante about the dual narrative that characterises the Neapolitan Quartet: should Elena and Lila be "interpreted as a single character? As two sides of a single person? Does every writer consist of two halves?" (322). Ferrante's reply is at the same time a reflection on the act of writing and a declaration of poetics in favour of polyphony, and at the centre of both there is Dostoevsky:

> If we were made only of two halves, individual life would be simple, but the "I" is a crowd, with a large quantity of heterogeneous fragments tossing about inside. And the female "I", in particular, with its long history of oppression and repression, tends to shatter as it's tossed around, and to reappear and shatter again, always in an unpredictable way. Stories feed on the fragments, which are concealed under an appearance of unity and constitute a sort of chaos to depart from, an obscurity to illuminate. Stories, characters come from there. Reading Dostoyevsky when I was young, I thought that all the characters, the pure and the abominable, were actually his secret voices, hidden, cunningly wrought fragments. Everything was poured, unfiltered, and with extreme audacity, into his works. (322)

Moreover, in speaking of Dostoevsky, Ferrante reveals the traits, both conceptual and stylistic, in common between them: narration as a polyphony of voices, writing as a tension between order and chaos, and the idea of the "unfiltered" which both authors pour "with extreme audacity" into their writing.[9] Her description of Dostoevsky is best exemplified by his novella *Notes from Underground*, a text we view as a connecting thread weaving through the key concepts we will analyse, because it brings together existential concerns with questions about written expression and offers the motif of the underground as a useful signifier for these.[10] In order to understand the concepts at the core of both Ferrante's and Dostoevsky's poetics, we will begin by analysing the paradox of artistic creation.

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[7] This translation is by Vladimir Nabokov. The original Russian *mysl' izrechennaia est' lozh'* might be more literally rendered "An uttered thought is a lie." The Russian language has two words for "lie", with slight differences in nuance: *lozh'* (falseness) and *vran'e* (telling untruths). Likewise, it has two subtly different words for "truth": *istina* (absolute truth) and *pravda* (rightness). Dostoevsky was interested in the distinction between *istina* and *pravda*. For more on this, see Gibson (23–24). For a study of the meanings of the four terms, see Mondry and Taylor.

[8] Leatherbarrow has analysed the function of lying as a narrative device in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He establishes a "linkage between lying and the practice of secular narrative fiction" (144) where "lying is essentially an aesthetic device" for many of the characters (142).

[9] In the case of Ferrante, see, for example, the Europa Editions review of her earlier novel *The Lost Daughter*: "It's Leda's voice that's hypnotic, and it's the writing that makes it that way. Ferrante can do a woman's interior dialogue like no one else, with a ferocity that is shockingly honest, unnervingly blunt."

[10] Wood's review of Ferrante's fiction might just as well apply to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*: "Her novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader."

THE WRITER AT WORK AND THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

"When I write", Ferrante explains in *Frantumaglia*, "it's as if I were butchering eels. I pay little attention to the unpleasantness of the operation and use the plot, the characters, as a tight net to pull up from the depths of my experience everything that is alive and writhing, including what I myself have driven away as far as possible because it seemed unbearable" (226). Ferrante's account of the creative process recalls the attitude of Dostoevsky's Underground Man to his notes:

> In every man's remembrances there are things he will not reveal to everybody, but only to his friends. There are other things he will not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself [...] Finally, there are some things that a man is afraid to reveal even to himself [...] But now, when I am not only remembering, but have decided to write them down, now I want to test whether it is possible to be completely open with oneself and not be afraid of the whole truth. (*Notes from Underground* 45)

Both Dostoevsky and Ferrante use similar metaphors of hidden, low places for the psychological locus of painful self-examination: Dostoevsky's underground, described by him as a tragedy "consisting in suffering, self-castigation, consciousness of the highest and the inability of attaining it" (Dostoevskii, vol. 16, 329),[11] corresponds to "the depths of experience" from which Ferrante pulls up the raw material of her writing.

Writing, then, is the recovery of the unbearable, the unpleasant; pulling up from the depths what the writer can scarcely stand to reveal to themselves and pouring it on to the page: as it is, without embellishment or correction, unfiltered. Both Elena Ferrante (as the fictionalised author of *Frantumaglia*)[12] and the Underground Man emphasise that truthfulness is an important feature of writing (albeit highly challenging to attain, as the Underground Man's frequent admissions of lying attest).[13] This is not only a matter of content—for example, in Ferrante's case the messiness of female friendship or the taboo of maternal love—but also a matter of form. Ferrante alludes to a distrust of editing and polishing her work when she states, "the labor and the pleasure of truthful narration supplant any other concern, including a concern with formal elegance. I belong to the category of writers who throw out the final draft and keep the rough when this practice ensures a higher degree of authenticity" (*Frantumaglia* 522).[14]

In Dostoevsky's case, while it can be argued that his entire oeuvre engages with the form/content conundrum, the problem is most keenly felt in those texts whose first-person narrators are explicitly writers. These may be writers struggling to make a living from the practice, as in the case of Ivan Petrovich, the narrator of *Humiliated and Insulted*; or amateur producers of notes (*zapiski*) such as the Underground Man and Arkady Dolgoruky, the narrator of *The Adolescent*. These narrators write the texts that we as readers are reading. Even in novels without a first-person narrator, characters who insert their own narratives into the text frequently do so in the form of a manuscript they have written, as does Ippolit in *The Idiot*. Such narrators typically draw the reader's attention to the process of writing, offering reflections on the value of editing arising from rereading their notes. In the cases of Ivan Petrovich and Arkady Dolgoruky, this reflection is part of the attempt to make sense of events that have happened to them by writing those events down. At the same time, the urge to bring order to bear on chaos through the written medium is in tension with an awareness that if the writing is to be authentic, then it should remain unpolished and unedited ("unfiltered"). As Ippolit asserts in *The Idiot*, "I can't help feeling I have just written something terribly stupid; but, as I said, I have no time to correct anything; besides, I promise deliberately not to correct a single line in this manuscript, even though I notice that I am contradicting myself every few lines" (399). His sentiment is echoed by Arkady Dolgoruky: "I repudiate much of what I've written down, especially the tone of some of the phrases and pages, but I won't cross anything out or correct a single word" (*The Adolescent* 598). In this way, Dostoevsky's narrators abide by a similar ethos to that expressed by Ferrante: they valorise truthful narration, however disordered, however difficult to attain, over formal elegance.

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[11] Translated by Sarah Hudspith.

[12] The meta-layered dimension of *Frantumaglia* has been discussed by critics (particularly after Claudio Gatti's investigation for the *New York Review of Books* to uncover the writer's identity in 2016). Ferrante's letters and interviews are "literary works. They show artistry and imagination [...] But make no mistake: reading *Frantumaglia* is not as simple as reading the other half of Elena Ferrante. It is far more complicated than simply splitting her between the *I* who writes at her desk and the *I* who exists on the page" (Bakopoulos). But see also Barbara Alfano when she states that "*Frantumaglia* enacts a vindication for the postmodern dead author as it constructs a fictional one at the same time" (325).

[13] "I swear, gentlemen, I don't believe a word, not one single little word, of all I have scribbled down! That is, I do perhaps believe it, but at the same time, I don't know why, I feel or I suspect, that I'm lying like a trooper" (*Notes from Underground* 44).

[14] This can be seen also as a polemical stance advocating a style that is deliberately unartistic. After all, Ferrante insists: "Beautiful writing doesn't interest me; writing interests me" (*Frantumaglia* 298).

Similarly to many of Dostoevsky's novels, Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet is narrated in the first person by someone who is explicitly a writer. This is not a novelty in Ferrante's work (if they are not writers, the narrators/protagonists of her first novels have something to do with writing), but in the Quartet the act of writing is foregrounded: not only because this is the story of how Elena Greco, the narrator, became a successful writer (from the inspirational reading of *Little Women* to her last book, *A Friendship*, which caused Lila's disappearance); but also because the writing, editing, rereading, rewriting and commenting on texts, which themselves have crucial roles in the plot, takes a great deal of space in the novels.[15] In short, in the Neapolitan Quartet Elena takes every opportunity to dissect the act of writing, pondering the function of literature, her impact as a writer and particularly what it means to be a woman writer today. The reflection on writing appears most frequently, but not only, in the framing chapters.[16] In these chapters 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 her writing her story. A good example is a passage from the Prologue where Elena declares that she "began to write" (*My Brilliant Friend* 23) after, or rather because of, the disappearance of Lila. 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 wanted "to eliminate the entire life that she had left behind" (23), their life together; but writing is also a way for Elena to defy her friend, to challenge her one more time as a form of revenge: "We'll see who wins this time" (23). So from the very beginning, readers are informed of the symbiotic and competitive nature of this friendship and the pivotal role played by writing.

In Dostoevsky's oeuvre, the novel *Humiliated and Insulted* offers the most developed reflection on the practice of writing. The protagonist Ivan Petrovich is typical of Dostoevsky's writer-narrators, who fretfully anticipate the reactions of their real or imagined readership, who compare themselves with other ostensibly more successful writers, and thereby comment on what they believe makes a good writer. Ivan Petrovich reflects on his ability as a novelist at several points in the text, and discusses his work with other characters, who compare it to that of other writers. Early on we discover that his writing is marked by the emotional investment he makes in his creations, indicating that authenticity is a trait he values strongly:

> Frankly, if there was ever a time when I was really happy, it wasn't during those first intoxicating moments of my success, but long before that, when I hadn't yet read or shown my manuscript to anyone – during those long nights of ecstatic hopes and dreams and passionate love of my work, when I had grown attached to my vision, to the characters I had created myself, as though they were my own offspring, *as though they really existed* [...] (*Humiliated and Insulted* 24, italics added)

How well he communicates this authenticity is debated by his different readers. For example, his adoptive father praises his first novel for being easier to understand than works by more established authors, saying, "It touches you more. It's as though you were the very person it all happened to", but criticising his artistry: "The only thing I would change would be the style

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[15] Examples include Lila's short story "The Blue Fairy", her notebooks, her letters, her incendiary pamphlet, her "hypothetical text", Nino's articles and essays, Elena's article for the school journal, her exam paper, her articles for *L'Unità*, Elena and Lila's exposé article against the Solara brothers which preludes (causes?) the disappearance of Lila's daughter, Elena's books.

[16] For more on the metafictional aspect of Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet, see Santovetti, "Melodrama or Metafiction?"

[…] it lacks elevation" (28). On the other hand, the child Nelly, who has difficulty grasping the distinction between reality and fiction, is so emotionally affected by reading his novel that Ivan Petrovich has to reassure her that it is all made up (202).

The relationship between authenticity and fiction is likewise central to the creative symbiosis between Elena and Lila. Elena realised that her "book was bad" because it was too "well organised" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 292), too well written, polished, and therefore not authentic. She argues that writing, her "job", is to give shape and order to the chaos, "to paste one fact to another with words" so that "everything has to seem coherent even if it's not" (246). As always, it is Lila, her brilliant friend, who challenges her assumptions: "But if the coherence isn't there, why pretend?" (246), forcing Elena to admit that this order, this coherence, is a fiction, a lie, and that behind the façade there is the abyss. Embodying two opposing forces, one towards order and the other towards disorder, Elena and Lila enact the writer's dilemma in imposing an order on the chaotic human experience. As Lila "always found a way of telling" Elena: "either one is capable of telling things just as they happened, in teeming chaos, or one works from imagination, inventing a thread" (464); Lila uses the verb "inventing" with a distinctive negative nuance because it alludes to the power of fiction to impose artificially a linearity, the "thread", that does not exist in real life.

In a similar way in *Humiliated and Insulted*, Nelly challenges Ivan Petrovich: "Why do you write things that aren't true?" (164). Although Ivan Petrovich is a novelist by profession, his motive for writing the text that we are reading is not purely a creative or professional one. Dostoevsky's first-person narrators write their narratives primarily for themselves, so as to process and bring a sense of order to chaotic events (the notion of writing for a readership is secondary, albeit, as they invariably find out, inescapable). Like Elena Greco they seek to forge coherence out of the messiness of human life. Thus, Ivan Petrovich notes, "All these impressions from the past sometimes afflict me painfully, to the point of torment. But once they've been written down, they will take on a calmer, more orderly aspect; they will be less of a delirium and a nightmare to me. At least I believe so" (13). However, his concluding remark indicates an underlying doubt as to whether writing can in fact create such order and remain authentic. Other narrators are more frank; in *The Adolescent* Arkady laments, "But writing like this always results in gibberish or haziness" (19). Therefore, even an attempt to write the truth results in a fiction, a lie, recalling Tyutchev's "A thought once uttered is untrue", so that there is no straightforward answer to Nelly's question.

In Dostoevsky's non-fiction we see in constant debate the contrasting positions on poetics represented by Lila and Elena. On the one hand his journalistic essays on the arts demonstrate his conviction that aesthetic accomplishment is essential for a work of art to convey its ideas truthfully. For example, in the article "Mr —bov and the Question of Art" he asserts, "an inartistic work never under any circumstances attains its aim" (99). On the other hand, his frequent exasperated memos to self in the drafts to his novels echo the frustrations of his fictional writer-narrators about the difficulty of finding an artistic form capable of expressing a truthful idea. In his notebooks for *The Adolescent* he exclaims, "The form! The form! A simple tale à la Pushkin!" (Dostoevskii, vol. 16, 122).[17] But more importantly, he recognises the fundamental disorder of the human condition which art must capture: "the need for beauty is felt more strongly when men are at variance with reality, in a state of disharmony, in conflict, that is to say, when they are *most of all alive*" ("Mr —bov" 125). This statement echoes his description of the underground as "awareness of the highest and the inability to attain it", and demonstrates how the underground is a central concern of his poetics.

THE POETICS OF THE UNDERGROUND

Elena Greco draws attention to the importance of disorder when she wishes she could "write the way [Lila] speaks, leave abysses, construct bridges and not finish them, force the reader to establish the flow" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 169). Elena's mention of "abysses" alludes to the importance of the underground in written expression. She uses metaphors of rupture and liquefication which echo Ferrante's own words from the Joos interview quoted above ("shatter", "fragments", "poured, unfiltered"), and which are further developed in a passage from an interview with Nicola Lagioia:

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[17] Translated by Sarah Hudspith.

> I'm drawn, rather, to images of crisis, to seals that are broken, and perhaps the dissolving boundaries [*smarginature*] come from these. When shapes lose their contours, we see what most terrifies us, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and Clarice Lispector's extraordinary *Passion According to G.H*. You don't go beyond that; you have to take a step back and, to survive, reenter some good fiction. I don't believe, however, that every fiction we orchestrate is good. I cling to those that are painful, those that arise from a profound crisis of all our illusions. I love unreal things when they show signs of first-hand knowledge of the terror, and hence an awareness that they are unreal, that they will not hold up for long against the collisions. (*Frantumaglia* 373)[18]

Here Ferrante uses a term she is known for having coined: *smarginatura*. *Smarginatura* is a sensation of reality losing its margins, collapsing, showing its underlying, chaotic brutality and leaving the subject traumatised. It is what happens to Lila at the New Year's party in *My Brilliant Friend* when the "beloved outline" of her brother lost consistency, broke down and "the matter expanded like a magma, showing her what he was truly made of" (176).[19] Although in the Lagioia interview Ferrante does not articulate in detail the nature of the "terror" revealed by *smarginatura*, when taken in the context of the episodes described in the Neapolitan Quartet, we can surmise that it is a sense of existential chaos and disorder, which provokes a fear that human life is meaningless. This fear in the face of chaos has "underground" characteristics and it is experienced in various permutations by a panoply of Dostoevsky's characters, from the Underground Man to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, from Ippolit in *The Idiot* to Shigalev and Kirilov in *The Devils*, from Versilov in *The Adolescent* to Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*.[20]

Similarly, Dostoevsky himself meditated on what he called the "terrible enigma" of reality, and the artifice of attempting to capture it in words. In a draft for his *Diary of a Writer* for October 1876, he invoked the Tyutchev quotation in this regard, musing:

> Indeed, it is true that reality is more profound than any human imagination, any fantasy. And regardless of the apparent simplicity of phenomena, it is a terrible enigma. It is an enigma, perhaps, in that nothing is finished in reality, likewise it is impossible to seek the beginnings – everything flows and everything *is*, but you cannot grasp anything. And whatever you do grasp, whatever you conceive, whatever you specify in words instantly becomes a lie. "A thought once uttered is untrue." (Dostoevskii, vol. 23, 326)[21]

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that episodes analogous to *smarginatura*, where the terrible enigma of reality is revealed, can be found in Dostoevsky's novels. One occurs in *The Idiot*, in Ippolit's ekphrasis of the painting *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein the Younger. The shocking realism of the trauma to Christ's physical body confronts Ippolit with the certainty of human mortality, a terrifying truth of the human condition. Ippolit, who senses the terror keenly as he contemplates the painting, connects it to the conundrum of authentic expression captured by Tyutchev's "A thought once uttered is untrue." In one of Dostoevsky's most profound reflections on the problem of artistry, Ippolit asks: "Can anything appear in a vivid image that has no image?" (*The Idiot* 420). In Russian, the term for "image" is *obraz*, a word that also means form or shape. Something that has no image or form is characterised by the term *bezobrazie*, literally "without shape". This term has wider connotations: it is often used to express horror or outrage and so can also be interpreted as "disorder" or "disgrace", as in a lack or loss of grace.[22] *Bezobrazie* is a significant term in Dostoevsky's poetics, which we argue has strong parallels with Ferrante's *smarginatura*.[23] For example, "shapeless" is a special word in Ferrante's fiction as well. Lila mentions the word "with a gesture of revulsion", Nino repeats it "as if it were a curse word" (*The Story of a New Name* 222), and this is because "shapelessness" is clearly another word for *smarginatura*: "That people, even more than things, lost their boundaries and overflowed into shapelessness is what most frightened Lila in the course of her life" (355).

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[18] In the original Italian, "unreal" is *finte. Finto* may mean both "false" and "fictional": a play on words which Ferrante employs to call literature into question, and which is lost in the translation of "unreal".

[19] For *smarginatura*, see also the episode of the earthquake in *The Story of the Lost Child*, chapters 49–53, in particular the following passage: "She used that term: *dissolving boundaries*. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it frightened her. She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard. She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing" (175–76).

[20] Dostoevsky's fiction most often explores this existential terror alongside examinations of Christian faith, and most studies foreground the importance of faith in his works (see, for example, Gibson, Williams). It is beyond the scope of our study to compare the function of faith in Dostoevsky and Ferrante's fiction, but this an area that is ripe for further analysis.

[21] Translated by Sarah Hudspith. Cieply and Lunde have commented on this passage in studies that deal with issues of silence and apophatism in Dostoevsky. Our analysis differs from theirs in that we focus not on what is not said, but on the falsity of the utterance.

For both Ferrante and Dostoevsky, then, coherent form is a façade, and when that façade is broken the unfiltered chaos that is illuminated provokes a reaction of terror. And yet, as a writer, Ferrante affirms that this underground terror must be glimpsed in order for writing to be authentic and valuable, as the Lagioia interview testifies. That the character Elena Greco is a writer is important. During the crisis provoked by the earthquake, Elena "would remain firm, [she] was the needle of the compass that stays fixed", while Lila "struggled to feel stable" and "perceived herself as a liquid"; this is linked to Elena being a writer because "even the lava, the fiery stream of melting matter that I imagined inside the earthly globe, and the fear it provoked in me, settled in my mind in orderly sentences, in harmonious images" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 179). While describing this traumatic existential experience of her friend, Elena ponders her job as a writer, who strives to pour the unfiltered on to the page—to convey the horror underneath, the *smarginatura*—without, however, compromising its authenticity. Will she be up to the task? This is the struggle of Elena in the Neapolitan Quartet, and the source of her constant dissatisfaction.

It is clear, then, how in both the fiction and non-fiction of Dostoevsky and Ferrante, the discussion moves from an existential theme to a discourse on the craft of writing, and vice versa, in a very self-reflective fashion. Elena Greco (as well as Elena Ferrante) ponders often "the relationship between truth and fiction" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 283), how the form employed by the writer to organise disorderly matter—and put it, in Elena's words, "in orderly sentences, in harmonious images" (179)—becomes in fact a way to "hide precisely what it would be valuable to tell" (*Those Who Leave* 80), and therefore a fiction, an invention, a lie. Clearly what is at stake here is the double power of writing: it can normalise, polish and reassure, compromising the authenticity of reality, or, as Elena grasps in a flash, it can "imitate the disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical, shapeless banality of things" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 310–11). How can the writer keep the right balance? How can writing be truthful to itself, that is, give a form, invent a thread, without simplifying or domesticating the disorderly tangle?

POLYPHONY AS (VERSUS) AUTHENTICITY

The answer has been identified by Bakhtin, who argued that Dostoevsky's novels exemplified the quality of polyphony. He defined this as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (*Problems* 6). Further, Bakhtin highlights that Dostoevsky's artistic method is to capture this plurality in all the contradictoriness of a single moment: "The fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but *coexistence* and *interaction* […] For him, to get one's bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and *to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment*" (22). Therefore, it is not surprising that in Dostoevsky we find an aspiration to authenticity existing simultaneously with an awareness of the human urge to give form and shape. *The Brothers Karamazov* in particular dramatises this duality in the way that it foregrounds the practice of narrative. As mentioned above, storytelling is an essential part of the plot and architectonics: some stories are true and relate to the teller's own or others' lives; others are invented, for a variety of purposes including to entertain and to deceive. Additionally, the trial of Dmitrii Karamazov for the murder of his father presents competing narratives in the form of Dmitrii's own testimony and the arguments of the prosecution and defence. In his study of lying in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Leatherbarrow draws attention to two contrasting impulses of narrative: one, to "*bear witness*", impartially and without rhetorical embellishments, giving priority to authenticity, and the other, to "*create* a fictional world that is convincing in its verisimilitude", where the artistic integrity and impact of the narrative are prioritised (170). Using the examples of Dmitrii trying to give his account to the investigators, and of Alyosha chronicling the life of Father Zosima, Leatherbarrow demonstrates how the desire to bear witness is inextricable from the human drive to find the right artistic form.[24] These factors are key to understanding the plurality of voices that constitutes Dostoevsky's polyphony: it is not only that the voices of characters and narrator are given equal weight, but that within each voice there exist contrasting tonalities arising from the speaker's awareness of the context of the utterance and potential responses, a quality that Bakhtin later came to term "heteroglossia".[25] By leaving these tensions unresolved, Dostoevsky locates authentic writing in a paradox.

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[22] For more detail about *obraz* and *bezobrazie*, see Hudspith, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness* (172–75).

[23] For examples of Dostoevsky's use of the term *bezobrazie*, see Book Six Chapter Two of *The Brothers Karamazov* in Dostoevskii (vol. 14). In Dostoevsky, by comparison with *smarginatura*, *bezobrazie* has moral as well as existential and aesthetic connotations.

The debt to Dostoevsky as the inventor of the polyphonic novel is openly acknowledged by Ferrante in the passage from the interview with Ruth Joos analysed in our Introduction. This passage allows us to demonstrate that while the interviewer highlights *dialogue* between the voices of Lila and Elena, Ferrante's concern, and therefore ours, is the larger category of *polyphony* which entertains a variety of manifestations of multi-voicedness. The passage is not only a passionate tribute to Dostoevsky, and to the way in which his polyphony captures authenticity, but also a manifesto of Ferrante's own poetics: the starting point is that the "I" is a crowd, yes, but the focus is on the female "I", which from its "history of oppression and repression" (*Frantumaglia* 322) is more likely to be shattered and exposed to the crisis of the self that Ferrante calls *smarginatura*. In other words, Dostoevsky's polyphony is viewed by Ferrante through the lens of the feminist thought of the 1980s.

The theory of the narratable self of the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (inspired by women's consciousness-raising activities characteristic of 1970s Italian feminism) is in fact the other key to understanding Ferrante's polyphony.[26] Cavarero herself observed that in the Neapolitan Quartet, there is "a continuous exchange whereby each becomes the narrator of the other woman"; this results in "a new literary genre that is neither purely autobiographical nor simply biographical […] At the center of the plot is a *relational subjectivity* that is continuously in progress, continuously narrated" (Pinto et al. 239). "I wish she were here"—says Elena—"That's why I am writing. I want her to erase, add, collaborate in our story" (*Those Who Leave* 105). The narrator is not Elena but Elena *and* Lila: writing is a collaboration between the one who writes to bring order, to make sense of the world, and the one who "leaves abysses" and "forc[es] the reader to establish the flow" (*The Story of the Lost Child* 169). Not only does Lila's voice emerge, as Tiziana de Rogatis specifies, "from the various forms of documentary materials that she left behind" (43), but Elena herself continuously draws attention to how the voice of her friend "appears in hers", in a dynamic movement of less and more, mine and yours:

> My life forces me to imagine what hers would have been if what happened to me had happened to her, what use she would have made of my luck. And her life continuously appears in mine, in the words that I've uttered, in which there's often an echo of hers, in a particular gesture that is an adaptation of a gesture of hers, in my less which is such because of her more, in my more which is the yielding to the force of her less. Not to mention what she never said but let me guess, what I didn't know and read later in her notebooks. Thus the story of the facts has to reckon with filters, deferments, partial truths, half lies: from it comes an arduous measurement of time passed that is based completely on the unreliable measuring device of words. (*The Story of a New Name* 337)

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[24] In a similar way, Bishop Tikhon identifies conflicting impulses of sincerity and narrative shaping in the text of Stavrogin's confession in *The Devils*.

[25] See Bakhtin, "Discourse". In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies a number of related features that can be categorised as heteroglossia: double-voiced or double-directed discourse, words with a sideward glance, hidden polemic, discourse with a loophole. Bakhtin's terminology varies throughout his essays on poetics. For the purposes of this article, we treat heteroglossia as a form of polyphony.

[26] Ferrante herself has acknowledged how much she was influenced by Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*: "I found its analysis of both the female impulse to narrate oneself and the desire to be narrated fascinating […] [W]hat kindled my imagination was an expression: *the necessary other*" (*In the Margins* 26–27).

This is Ferrante's polyphonic narration: one that not only keeps readers alert (essential in order to deal with the narrators' "filters, deferments, partial truths, half lies") but also directly involves them in this relationship in progress. What compels the readers is the forensic, raw, unhinged exploration of the female experience through the unmerged, strident voices of Elena and Lila, who keep narrating and exposing each other, one the "mirror of [the other's] inabilities" (*Those Who Leave* 274). In devising a "novel centered on two women friends who weave together the stories of their experience" (*In the Margins* 27), Ferrante is reframing the concept of polyphony in explicitly gendered terms. We should speak, as de Rogatis does, of a "female polyphony".[27]

A PARALLEL READING OF *THE ADOLESCENT* AND *THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS*

In the Neapolitan Quartet we see polyphony in the Elena–Lila narrating partnership, an ongoing interplay between two women that maintains the authenticity of the narrative. Hence polyphony is achieved via two voices, unmerged yet interacting dialogically with each other as equals. We now turn to Ferrante's latest novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, bringing it into comparison with Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*, in order to examine the polyphony in a single narrative voice[28] and its contribution to the narrator's quest for authenticity in the face of the awareness of the inherent artifice, or lie, of narrative. In conducting this parallel reading, we aim to show the specific implications for women of this quest under a patriarchal society.

The Lying Life of Adults has a remarkable number of correspondences with *The Adolescent*. Both are first-person narratives, told by young people in the transition to adulthood, looking back over recent tumultuous and painful events in their lives. Both young narrators, Giovanna and Arkady, have a complex relationship with their father, whom they idolise. Both fathers are described as urbane, intellectual, eloquent (and coincidentally they share the same first name in their Italian and Russian variants). Both these men try to control the narrative presented to the adolescent protagonists about their wider circle of relations, and both are ultimately found to be unfaithful to the protagonists' mothers. In addition, in both texts the drama of the plot is driven by the protagonists' fascination with a strong female character who is feared and/or hated by their father—in *The Adolescent* this is Katerina Nikolaevna, and in *The Lying Life* it is Aunt Vittoria. Finally, the relationship with these difficult female characters revolves around a talismanic object: Katerina Nikolaevna's letter concerning her father's mental capacity, and Vittoria's bracelet supposedly destined to have been given to Giovanna as a christening present.[29]

Bringing these two texts into dialogue reveals an interesting gendered dimension to the quest for authentic narration and to the existential terror it is intended to reveal. As narrators, Arkady and Giovanna peer into their own underground depths as a means of processing their loss of innocence in the face of the elusiveness of truth. But by recasting the themes of *The Adolescent* with a female narrator, Ferrante's text explores the violence to the integrity of the female "I" contingent on this process. While Arkady concludes his manuscript professing to have "re-educated" himself (*The Adolescent* 598) in the process of telling his story, suggesting a greater sense of personal coherence, Giovanna emphasises at the outset that the narrative process has not granted her any such sense. The opening of the novel is worth quoting in full:

> Two years before leaving home my father said to my mother that I was very ugly. The sentence was uttered under his breath, in the apartment that my parents, newly married, had bought at the top of Via San Giacomo dei Capri, in Rione Alto. Everything—the spaces of Naples, the blue light of a frigid February, those words—remained fixed. But I slipped away, and am still slipping away, within these lines that are intended to give me a story, while in fact I am nothing, nothing of my

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[27] See de Rogatis (42–47). In particular: "Female polyphony is also a response, grounded in form, to varieties of male monologism: that of violence against the women in the *rione* and that of intellectual autism" (46).

[28] Interestingly, Stiliana Milkova observes that "[t]he presence of multiple women writers in the text – Giovanna who narrates, Ida who chronicles Giovanna's life, and Nella who rewrites romance novels – amplifies and complicates the polyphony of Ferrante's other novels. The polyphony in *The Lying Life of Adults* is comprised of the words of different writing and speaking women whose voices capture from different perspectives a composite and unstable female subjectivity" (172).

[29] For an insightful and in-depth analysis of the meaning of the bracelet in *The Lying Life of Adults*, see Milkova (168–72).

> own, nothing that has really begun or really been brought to completion: only a tangled knot, and nobody, not even the one who at this moment is writing, knows if it contains the right thread for a story or is merely a snarled confusion of suffering, without redemption. (*The Lying Life* 11)

The opening contains in a nutshell many of the themes we have discussed so far, most importantly the artifice of utterance (if we look closely the first words are a lie—what Andrea actually said is that Giovanna is "getting the face of Vittoria"), the *smarginatura* ("I slipped away…") and the reflection on writing. The latter is foregrounded in the last enigmatic lines which reformulate the tension between writing order (the impulse to create, to find "the right thread") and writing chaos (the drive to bear witness to the "snarled confusion"), and make clear, should there still be a need, that the act of writing can never bring consolation, can never redeem life's suffering arising from the hidden terror of meaninglessness. We will start our comparison by focusing on the unreliability of the adolescent narrators.

The Adolescent establishes from the outset that the point of view of the teenage first-person narrator is constantly shifting; the labile nature of adolescence is the ideal platform for demonstrating the treachery of discourse. Arkady begins his narrative by proclaiming that he is "[u]nable to hold back", professing that a sense of necessity drives him to tell his story, but then in the very next sentence he claims that he "could actually get by without doing so" (*The Adolescent* 5). This is because his narrative is pervaded by a feature of polyphony Bakhtin called a "loophole":

> the retention for oneself of the possibility for uttering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words […] The loophole makes all the heroes' self-definitions unstable, the word in them has no hard and fast meaning, and at any moment, like a chameleon, it is ready to change its tone and its ultimate meaning. The loophole makes the hero ambiguous and elusive even for himself […] The hero does not know whose opinion, whose statement is ultimately the final judgment on him […] (*Problems* 233–34)

Arkady is intensely concerned with what others think of him, and his narrative is oriented towards trying to determine a stable identity for himself. This orientation, in spite of his assertion that he is writing solely for himself and not "to win the reader's acclaim" (*The Adolescent* 5), is manifested in a frequent recourse to justifying himself before his imagined readers, for example, "I've just envisaged that if I had at least one reader he'd probably roar with laughter at me, a most ridiculous adolescent who, having held on to his silly innocence, butts in to judge and decide things he doesn't understand" (11). Arkady fixates on the judgement of all who know him, whether this be his family, his schoolmates, the young radicals of the Dergachev group, or above all his father, constantly seeking to demonstrate he is other than their appraisal of him. His every word is therefore shot through with a "sideward glance", to use another of Bakhtin's terms, that colours his discourse with anticipation of others' voices.[30] Further, he regularly undermines his own reliability, first assuring the reader that he is "deliberately not omitting the slightest strand", then that he "won't describe anything now that doesn't have a direct bearing on the matter", and eventually that "perhaps I've slandered myself for half or even seventy-five per cent of the time" (523, 564). This results in an extremely audacious, heteroglossic narrative that undergoes unpredictable changes of tone and direction, "embracing an aesthetics of chaos" (Egdorf 15), and making it one of the most challenging to read of Dostoevsky's novels. Arkady's disrupted narrative forces the reader to establish the flow between the different elements of the plot, such as between events within and outside the novel's timeframe, and other characters' versions of those events that he did not witness. We must remember that Arkady has vowed not to edit or polish his manuscript, in his desire to present an authentic account of all that has befallen him, hence this disordered narrative is part of Dostoevsky's design.

Arkady's story is one of uncovering secrets and revealing truths. In the course of his adventures he becomes increasingly aware of the duplicitousness of discourse: that, for example, everyone including himself has multiple motives for wanting to possess Katerina Nikolaevna's letter, and that it is impossible at any given moment to be certain which motives govern a character's behaviour. In recounting his story he pulls up from the depths of his underground nature the unpleasant, unbearable raw material that he can scarcely stand to face: his predatory lust for Katerina Nikolaevna, his humiliation at school, the affront of his illegitimacy, his longing for a meaningful relationship with his father. This confrontation with the terrible enigma of reality provokes at one point an episode not unlike *smarginatura*. Having been falsely accused of theft and forcibly ejected from a gambling salon, Arkady experiences a sense of the extreme meaninglessness of life and dislocation from reality, brought about by the violence of the lie about him:

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[30] "In Dostoevsky almost no word is without its intense sideward glance at someone else's word" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 203).

> "There's no longer anything to aim for," it seemed to me in that moment. Strangely, I kept on thinking that everything around me, even the air I was breathing, was from another planet, as though I'd suddenly landed on the moon. Everything – the city, the passers-by, the pavement I was running along – they were all no longer *mine.* (356)

The episode ends with a night spent passed out in the frost, an ill-fated encounter with the villainous Lambert, and ultimately nine days of sickness. Yet Arkady concludes his narrative claiming to have begun a new life and seemingly more at ease with himself. He is content to leave the last word to his former tutor, who reassures the reader of the value and authenticity of Arkady's narrative:

> That is when such 'Notes' as yours will be needed and will offer material – as long as they are genuine, despite their chaotic and random nature... At least some truthful features will remain intact, to help us guess what may have lain hidden in the soul of an adolescent of that troubled time – an exploration of no mean value since it is from adolescents that the generations are made... (609)

Arkady ultimately appears to come to terms with the paradox of being a narrator; the same cannot be said of Giovanna, whose story starts as a classic coming of age story but is fated—according to Ferrante herself—"to remain incomplete, more a tangle than a story" (*In the Margins* 39).

In *The Lying Life of Adults*, as in *The Adolescent*, unreliable narration, the adolescent dimension and the experience of *smarginatura* are tightly connected one with another. First of all, adolescence, or the crisis experienced in adolescence, is described with words that are very similar to the experience of *smarginatura*: "Maybe at that moment something somewhere in my body broke, maybe that's where I should locate the end of my childhood. I felt as if I were a container of granules that were imperceptibly leaking out of me through a tiny crack" (*The Lying Life* 38). This is Giovanna Trada, the adolescent protagonist and narrator, trying to locate the very beginning of her story: everything started when, undergoing "[her] first experience of privation" (38), she stopped being a child and turned into an adolescent, the "ugly" child of the opening line. In comparison with the dual narrative of the Neapolitan Quartet, here we have a single narrative voice. And yet there is both a Giovanna before the event that marked "the end of her childhood", when she lived in a "well-ordered world" (49) as a "good girl" (22) with loved and loving parents, and a Giovanna who writes the story afterwards, the one who has gone through and come out of the trauma. The constantly changing point of view is one of the most intriguing features of the novel, as it is in *The Adolescent*. The readers' views also become mobile and unsettled following the undulating motion of Giovanna's mind when she starts her mission of "spying" (90) on her parents and the world around her: "an incongruous juxtaposition of vulgarity and refinement became central [...] My aunt who was vulgar, became a woman of taste. My father and Costanza, people of taste, became [...] vulgar" (133). Following her "obsessive brooding" (131), our perception—of the parents, of Aunt Vittoria, of the narrated events and also of Giovanna—changes too: we keep reassessing, rethinking what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. In this "tangled knot" the readers, like Giovanna, are "losing every old orientation" (133). In other words, the adolescent is not only the *smarginato* subject par excellence, but, as narrator, is also the most unreliable: Giovanna's position is always shifting because, like Arkady, her every utterance is made with a sideward glance at the differing perspectives of those around her and with the attempt to retain a loophole that will allow her to appear sincere in all circles ("I wasn't a truly affectionate daughter and I wasn't a truly loyal spy", 91). The result is frequent lying which "seemed unavoidable" (49). This perpetual oscillation between lie and truth makes Giovanna rethink another traditional distinction: that between good and evil. In her ramblings she discovers how subjective and how porous this distinction actually is.

The ambivalence between good and evil was already a leitmotif of the Neapolitan Quartet (starting from the epigraph, taken from Goethe's *Faust*), but in *The Lying Life of Adults* it is foregrounded because of its link with "the end of childhood" and the process of becoming an adult. Significantly, Giovanna's two opposing models, her father, "unfailingly courteous" (11), an "extraordinary man" (24), and Vittoria, "the aunt-witch" (132), whose face "seemed so vividly insolent that it was very ugly and very beautiful at the same time" (58), tell her very similar things: "without the ugly things the good ones don't exist" (Vittoria, 73); "good becomes evil without you realizing it" (Andrea, 161). Growing up means understanding that things are not what they seem, that ugly can turn into beautiful and that good can turn into evil. In reassessing her parents, taking them down from a pedestal—indispensable in becoming an adult—the father is the one who attracts most of the daughter's contempt: she does not forgive him, indeed "he knew the bad better than Aunt Vittoria" (162). The father is the one who abandoned the family and, most poignantly, had a double life for a long time in his extra-marital relationship with Costanza: Andrea exemplifies duplicity.[31]

The same duality and duplicity are found in the character of Andrei Petrovich Versilov in *The Adolescent*. The absence of Versilov from his formative years creates in Arkady the need to construct a single, coherent personality for his father, to identify him as either good or bad: "Every daydream of mine, since childhood, spoke of him […] I don't know whether I hated him or loved him […] I really want to know what kind of a man he is and now it's even more important than ever" (19, 70). Versilov's dual nature is gradually revealed to the reader, first through conflicting rumours, such as that he wore chains and preached the Last Judgment, and also that he impregnated and caused the suicide of Katerina Nikolaevna's teenage stepdaughter,[32] and then through Arkady's accounts of his own conversations with him. In these encounters we see a man whose eloquence and intellectual sophistication enable him to analyse himself, but, owing to the absence of any fundamental belief system, also erode the distinction between good and evil. With Arkady, Versilov holds forth on any number of topics, from so-called "Geneva" ideas of morality without Christianity to theories about a Jewish conspiracy, from the nature of Russian nobility to the future of European civilisation. Ultimately, however, Versilov believes in none of these and his words ring hollow to Arkady, who longs for fatherly guidance: "He replied readily and directly, but in the end always fell back on general aphorisms so that, in essence, there was nothing to hold on to" (228).

This hollowing out of the meaning of words leads to a similar eradication of distinction between truth and falsehood. Arkady, whose whole existence is based on a false legitimacy, is desperate to identify the true Versilov, his "true" father, but he never succeeds (and consequently Versilov never quite comes into focus for the reader either): "[T]his man largely remains even now a complete mystery to me" (6–7). In fact, like Giovanna with her father, if there is anything that Arkady learns from Versilov, it is how to lie. Probably the only sincere word that comes from Versilov is when he says, speaking of himself in the third person in reaction to Arkady's calling him an honest man, "He's always lying to you" (282).

The dissolution of the boundaries between truth and falsehood, and between good and evil, leads Versilov to say of himself, "I can very suitably experience two contradictory feelings at one and the same time – and of course not by my own volition. But nevertheless I know that it's dishonest" (228). These two emotions are primarily embodied in his love for Arkady's mother, Sofia Andreevna, and his lust for Katerina Nikolaevna, which itself bifurcates into both passion and hatred. His duality comes to a head when Sofia's husband Makar Dolgoruky dies, leaving Versilov free to marry Sofia and yet unable to shake off his obsession with Katerina Nikolaevna. In a moment of *smarginatura* that speaks not just to the dissolving but the violent shattering of boundaries, he utters:

> I am mentally being split in two and am terribly scared. It's as though your double is standing next to you. You yourself are clever and sensible, but the other absolutely wants to do something totally absurd, or sometimes something that's great fun, and

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[31] The father/daughter relationship that we see explored in *The Lying Life of Adults* is a novelty in Ferrante's fiction: see Thurman, Santovetti "Being", Walker and Alfano. Walker (342) speaks of "paternal mythology": "the narrator's sense of herself as deformed is mediated through a paternal mythology in which he takes control of the narrative of the women around him, positioning Giovanna as a failure and Vittoria as a malevolent 'aunt-witch'".

[32] The first of these rumours is neither denied nor confirmed by Versilov; the second is found to be false.

> you suddenly notice that it's you yourself who wants to do this fun thing, God knows why, as though you want to do it against your will, and you try to resist it with all your might. (547)

At this point, he smashes into two pieces the icon that Makar Dolgoruky had bequeathed him, and soon afterwards hesitates between shooting Katerina Nikolaevna and shooting himself. It seems that Versilov never fully recovers from this confrontation with the underground terror of meaninglessness in his life; in the Epilogue Arkady notes, "Oh, this is only half of the former Versilov" (597). However, by the same token, Arkady's relationship with him ends up stronger and more consistent, providing a sense of resolution lacking in *The Lying Life*: "I'll say outright that I've never loved him as much as I do now" (597).

Arkady's eventually more stable relationship with Versilov highlights a key contrast with *The Lying Life* that hinges on gender. Like Giovanna, Arkady navigates the permeable boundaries between good and evil, but unlike Giovanna he is mainly under the guidance of various male characters. In the relationship between Vittoria and Giovanna we see the difference that Ferrante's choice of a female protagonist makes. In *The Adolescent*, Katerina Nikolaevna is subject to the male gaze: she typifies Laura Mulvey's designation of the "signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (7). A male narrator can only objectify her—Arkady frequently refers to her as "that woman"—and therefore, any apparent inconsistency in her character is shown to be a projection of male powerlessness in the face of her beauty, which both father and son experience variously as slavish adulation and hatred.[33]

On the other hand, because Giovanna is female, the reader sees differently through her eyes the woman feared and hated by the father. Vittoria, shown to the reader first-hand outside of the male gaze, refuses to be a silent bearer of meaning. Her defiant, strident voice, which erupts where it is not proper, not expected or not wanted, carries what Diane Price Herndl describes as "a multivoiced or polyphonic resistance to hierarchies and laughter at authority" (8). Vittoria is a more nuanced, complex character than Katerina Nikolaevna. She is a woman who refuses to be dominated by men, especially those of higher social class, who takes a married lover against her family's wishes, stands by his widow when her lover dies, and remains true to his memory; but at the end of the novel she is ultimately lonely, abandoned by those she loves. This is the tragic consequence of her resistance to patriarchal discourse. Vittoria therefore reveals to Giovanna the underground: the messy, painful, self-destructive contradictions of human nature that resist a coherent narrative. Giovanna learns through meeting Vittoria not only about the unreliability of words, but also about the way that the patriarchal discourse manipulates the categories of "ugly" and "beautiful" with devastating consequences for women.[34] The impact on Giovanna of Roberto telling her she is beautiful is profound: "Be careful what you say: my face has already changed, and because of my father I turned ugly; don't you, too, play with changing me, making me become beautiful. I'm tired of being exposed to other people's words" (*The Lying Life* 293). The only solution for women is to be elusive, as Herndl has observed: "Feminine language, then, is marked by process and change, by absence and shifting, by multivoicedness. Meaning in feminine language is always 'elsewhere', between voices or between discourses, marked by a mistrust of the 'signified'" (11).

THE "TRAGEDY OF THE UNDERGROUND": THE GENDERED IMPLICATIONS OF AUTHENTIC NARRATION

For Dostoevsky, the confrontation with the lie of discourse and the terror of the potential meaninglessness of life, which we have associated with his paradigm of the underground, was the essence of his oeuvre. "Underground, underground, *poet of the underground* – the feuilletonists have been repeating this as if it were something humiliating for me. Fools! This is my glory, for therein lies the truth", he railed in a notebook entry in 1875 (Dostoevskii, vol. 16, 330).[35] His underground is echoed in Ferrante's "pulling up from the depths". Significantly, de Rogatis concludes her seminal 2019 monograph on Ferrante by reflecting on the metaphor of the cave and proposing a definition of "underground realism" which is both experimental and uncanny (279), enacted by polyphony[36] and informed by a "distinct feminist matrix". In other words, Ferrante transforms Dostoevsky's "tragedy of the underground" into the tragedy of women—and women writers—under patriarchy, not only because all her female characters experience the underground and are consequently survivors, not victims, but also because she turns writing into a gendered and militant activity. The dissatisfaction that both Ferrante and Dostoevsky experience as writers in their constant polyphonic tension between bearing witness and creating (to keep the authenticity despite the embellishment of fiction) acquires with Ferrante a distinctive gendered dimension; it becomes, as the writer remarks in a 2015 interview, a "systematic discontent" (*Frantumaglia* 341): that of a woman writer battling with the male literary tradition. The woman writer not only "must know the tradition thoroughly" (as Ferrante does, and her tribute to Dostoevsky is a good example) but she needs "to learn to reuse it, bending it as needed. The battle with the raw material of our experience as women requires *authority* above all. Further, we have to fight against submissiveness, and boldly, in fact proudly, seek a literary genealogy of our own" (*Frantumaglia* 343, italics added).

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[33] The spiritual meaning of beauty was another of Dostoevsky's preoccupations, perhaps most famously encapsulated in the assertion in *The Idiot* that "beauty will save the world" (394). While it is beyond the scope of our article to compare Dostoevsky's and Ferrante's treatments of beauty, this would be a fertile area of study.

[34] An insightful account of how patriarchal discourse and settings are subverted in Ferrante's last novel can be found in Walker, particularly the section "Defacing patriarchy in *The Lying Life of Adults*" (339–46).

In *The Lying Life of Adults* it is Vittoria who provides the model of a woman fighting against submissiveness and striving for authorial control of her own narrative. Here the image of Vittoria as the "aunt-witch" allows us to posit that in Ferrante's poetics, the witch is the feminist corollary to Dostoevsky's poet of the underground. In an essay entitled "Histories, I", in her most recent collection, significantly titled *In the Margins: On the Pleasure of Reading and Writing* (2022), Ferrante responds to a short Emily Dickinson poem on witchcraft by proposing the witch as "a woman who sits at a table and writes 'History and I' as a challenge, almost as a confrontation" (*In the Margins* 31). In the same essay, she once again evokes Dostoevsky by quoting from *Notes from Underground:* "The 'genuine "real life,"' as Dostoyevsky called it, is an obsession, a torment for the writer. With greater or less ability we fabricate fictions not so that the false will seem true but to tell the most unspeakable truth with absolute faithfulness through the fiction" (*In the Margins* 31–32). This quotation accurately captures the essence of polyphony for Dostoevsky and Ferrante, for it identifies the interrelationship between truth and lie, silence and utterance, authenticity and creativity. Thus does Vittoria offer an alternative family history as a challenge and confrontation to Giovanna's father, telling her unspeakable truth with an unswerving fearlessness that impresses her niece from the outset. However, this truth does not simply supplant Giovanna's original understanding of her family, but enters into dialogue with it and compels Giovanna to sift through the competing strands and formulate her own interpretation. From the moment of Giovanna's awakening to Vittoria's existence, the adolescent narrator begins a similar journey of confrontational authorship, beginning from her first attempts to undo Andrea's redaction of Vittoria's face from photographs, to her fairy-tale plots aimed at making sense of his infidelity (in which Vittoria is explicitly cast as the weaver of maleficent spells), and ultimately, by losing her virginity perfunctorily and without pleasure but entirely on her own terms.[37] Giovanna indeed gets "the face of Vittoria" in that she becomes a witch-poet of the underground. Ferrante's aspiration for the witch is that "from the writing that suffocated the spells, a female 'I' would derive a writing that, as needed, would return to complete them in daily life, joining people and things that supposedly couldn't be joined" (*In the Margins* 31). With this image of the act of writing as witchcraft Ferrante builds her argument about the precious contribution of women writers to our past and future literary tradition. This, as Enrica Ferrara has pointed out, is "an encouragement to all writers, of any gender, to identify a genealogy of women writers as their 'History' which—as quoted from Emily Dickinson's beautiful poem framing this essay—will not hang 'the witch's work on the gallows' but will 'find around us, all the witchcraft we need'" (Ferrara).

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[35] Translated by Sarah Hudspith.

[36] "Polyphony is the umbilical cord of the Neapolitan Novels connecting the realistic surface to the truth of the cave, and nourishing both" (de Rogatis 278).

[37] Walker underlines the significance of this "perfunctory and unsentimental" sex: the "novel's final defacement and greatest iconoclasm is that which destroys the patriarchal story of sex, a bodily activity which stands for the intersecting discourses of pleasure and pain, goodness and badness, beauty and ugliness which Giovanna has progressively deconstructed" (346).

But much needs to be done—indeed "not a line should be lost in the wind" warns Ferrante (*In the Margins* 40). The torment of the writer has been the pivot around which this comparison between Dostoevsky and Ferrante has been articulated. It testifies to their commitment to the real ("to tell the most unspeakable truth with absolute faithfulness") but also to their awareness of the impossibility of the task, the inadequacies and the possibilities of failure inherent in the act of writing. Hence their cries of distress, their constant dissatisfaction. To this Ferrante adds the acknowledgement of the difficulties still experienced by women writers in a male-dominated literary tradition:

> If that's true for the male "I" who writes, it's even more so for the female. A woman who wants to write has unavoidably to deal not only with the entire literary patrimony she's been brought up on and in virtue of which she wants to and can express herself but with the fact that that patrimony is essentially male and by its nature doesn't provide true female sentences. (*In the Margins* 36)

This lack of "true female sentences" must be challenged through the female polyphony of absence and shifting narration which exemplifies the tragedy of the underground, as we have argued in this article. The Neapolitan Quartet begins with Lila's disappearance and ends with her Bahktinian loophole of the return of the lost dolls to Elena, a gesture which she is unable to read conclusively and that thus motivates the end of her narrative. *The Lying Life of Adults* ends with Giovanna and Ida promising each other "to become adults as no one ever had before" (322), but the opening of the novel tells us that the older narrating Giovanna is "still slipping away" (11), which demonstrates the cost of her challenge to the patriarchy.

Our comparative analysis has shown that both Dostoevsky and Ferrante use metafictional reflections to reveal the challenge of the writer: that in order to authentically illuminate the chaos and obscurity of the human condition, the paradox of creating a fictional narrative must be embraced. When the similarities in their concerns and techniques are identified, a deeper understanding of polyphony is revealed, centring on the torment arising from the awareness of the tension between content and form, truth and lie. In Ferrante's hands, this torment is demonstrated to hinge for women on the patriarchal control of discourse and the existential violence that women writers endure in their struggle to find a voice. Our study therefore has wider implications for feminist readings of Bakhtin, in that it interprets polyphony not as straightforwardly positive or even neutral, but as a strategy that enacts costs upon its practitioners.

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