Künstlerroman of 'late modernity': Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* and Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet

The "*Künstlerroman* is alive and well" wrote an American critic in 2012 (Wallace) when volume 1 of Knausgård's *My Struggle* was translated into English. A "female *Künstlerroman*, a woman's story of coming of age as an artist in a male-dominated world" wrote another (*How We Spend Our Days*) on 1 August 2015 just before the Ferrante fever took hold. The label of *Künstlerroman* occurs very frequently in reference to both *My Struggle* and the Neapolitan Quartet. Among these occurrences two are particularly noteworthy: Ben Lerner's review in the *London Review of Books* in 2014, 'Each Cornflakes' ("*My Struggle* is a portrait of an artist who will turn his back on art, a *Künstlerroman* that is also a suicide note") and Lauren Groff's endorsement when Elena Ferrante was nominated by *Time* one of the top 100 most influential people of 2016 ("her four-novel Neapolitan story is an epic masterpiece, a *Künstlerroman* of sustained passion and fury"). The *Künstlerroman* ('artist-novel' in German) overlaps the Bildungsroman in showing the artist's growth to maturity and the development of an artistic vocation. *My Struggle* and the Neapolitan Quartet are indeed a reflection on art and writing, on what it means to be a writer today. The urgency with which Knausgård and Ferrante dissect the act of writing and ponder the function of literature is the object of this article. I will first contextualize their works as an example of the revival of the novel, a significant phenomenon of the new millennium. In particular, I will link Knausgård and Ferrante to the proliferation of self-narratives (autofictions, autobiographical novels, first-person novels) which plays a part in this rehabilitation of the novel. Making brief reference to other contemporary works (by Shields, Lerner and Kandasamy), I will spell out some of the features of these self-narratives, namely: why narrating the self has become the new imperative, the use of the autobiographical element, the emphasis on the 'raw material' and authenticity and finally the constant self-reflection. The comparison between Knausgård and Ferrante will then be articulated in an examination of the

collision of the real and the fictional and the preoccupation with authenticity which seem to be recurrent in the *Künstlerroman* of 'late modernity'.

In his highly acclaimed and best-selling work *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), David Shields (5), celebrated the advent of a new artistic movement characterised by a "deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional" but also by "emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation" and "self-reflexivity; self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real". The emphasis on "raw" material, the plea for a "reality-based art" – best exemplified for Shields by nonfiction genres including the lyric essay, memoir, and collage – and the criticism of the novel (and particularly the plot: "the novel sacrifices too much, for me, on the altar of plot" 114) was greeted with roaring praise but also with some perplexity because it seemed to rekindle the 'Is-the-novel-dead-(again)?' controversy. Certainly the novel (with its fictionalisation, its "invented plots and invented characters" 175) is for Shields inadequate to capture the speed and complexity of contemporary experience; besides, it is precisely because we live in fictitious times that Shields is bored with fictions ("Living as we perforce do in a manufactured world, we yearn for the "real", the semblances of the real. We want to pose something nonfictional against all the fabrication" 81).

A decade on from that manifesto (with ten more years of developments in the "manufactured world" of digital technologies and social media which finds us in the age of post-fact and datafication), and there is no trace of the demise of the novel. The opposite is true: there is a revival of the novel, with the global success of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet being just one of the most notable examples. But it is not only the Neapolitan Quartet. As Raffaele Donnarumma has written in his *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (2014 150) the first decades of the new millennium "hanno visto e stanno vedendo, non solo in Europa e negli Stati Uniti, una produzione romanzesca di qualità a tratti eccezionale".[i] Interestingly, the issues brought forward in

snippets, aphorisms, and borrowed quotes in *Reality Hunger*, are still shaping the lines in which contemporary novels seem to be evolving. These are novels that sit on the frontier between fiction and nonfiction: self-narratives, which include autobiographical novels, novels in the first-person, autofiction, memoirs, confession novels ("I'm drawn, instead, to "confession" because I like the way the temperature in the room goes up when I say "I did this" (even if I really didn't)", Shields 77). The emphasis is on authenticity and emotional urgency ("Write yourself naked, from exile, and in blood", Shields 182) as well as on self-reflexivity ("Contemporary narration is the account of the manufacturing of the work, not the actual work", Shields 36). The great yearning is for the "real" (to engage people "to look at life as it's really lived and react to it", Shields 50). Drawing from Hal Foster, Tiziana de Rogatis explains (*Key Words* 282) the "return to the real" as "deriv[ing] from a renewed sense of trauma" which is "born at the sunset of postmodernism" (283). Significantly, the return to the real is at the root of this proliferation of self-narratives as well as of the phenomenon of the global novel (the "new fictional realism" at transnational level under which de Rogatis (286) situates the Neapolitan Quartet).

Before examining Knausgård's *My Struggle* (2009-2011) and Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet (2011-2014) some common threads in the broad category of self-narratives, and specifically first-person novels, which dominate the present period will be identified. Since Knausgård and Ferrante are part of a trend, other works will be briefly referred to, in particular the more recent publications by the Indian poet, writer and political activist Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019), and the American poet and writer, Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School* (2019). Kandasamy and Lerner are Anglophone authors, but the reason for the comparison with the translated works of Knausgård and Ferrante lies more in their exemplarity as self-narratives, more specifically autofictional texts, than in their belonging to the global novel.

1. Contemporary self-narratives

Narrating the self. According to Donnarumma (90) the rehabilitation of the subject is one of the distinctive features of *ipermodernità*, 'late modernity' (or 'liquid modernity' – sociologist Zygmunt Bauman), which is our present period as succeeding the postmodern. In opposition to the postmodern myth of the death of the author, the subject now takes central stage and speaks out, a phenomenon that is both fomented and devalued by social media: "Se il soggettivismo e la narrazione in prima persona sono diventati pressoché istituzionali in una parte così grande della narrativa contemporanea italiana è perché l'io, nella sua fragilità, sembra essere l'unico bene residuo di fronte al mondo disgregato".[ii] The self as the last positive bastion against a disaggregated world appears not to be confined to the Italian scene. What we are witnessing, writes de Rogatis, is an "enterprise of international artists in search of new ways of experimenting with language in order to reconstruct the story of the "I"" (*Key Words* 283). Narrating the self is the new imperative. Hence, the overwhelming number of current self-narratives and first-person narrations. This is the premise of *My Struggle*, the monumental autobiography in six volumes by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård: "it is a book about the construction of the self" (Rother). In her chapter entitled 'Quantified Selves: Monumental Autobiography in the Facebook Age', Inge van de Ven (93) aptly argues that "Knausgård's urge to compile a monumental record of the everyday can be read as a literary manifestation of contemporary culture's tendency to archival obsession, exhibitionism and self-presentation", both influenced by and influencing the hyper-mediated present in which we find ourselves.

The autobiographical element. Ben Lerner is best known for his acclaimed trilogy of novels featuring a Lerner-like character named Adam Gordon. The last novel of the trilogy *The Topeka School* (2019), a coming of age story which explores the root of white male rage in contemporary America, has been particularly praised by the critics not only for combining the

"autofictional […] with the metafictional with exceptional dexterity" (Derbyshire), but particularly because it is "a polyphonic portrait of an entire community, yet never strays far from the autobiographical" (Rothfell). In a *Guardian* podcast interview Lerner is asked whether he feels any kinship with other autofictional contemporary writers (including Knausgård, Olivia Laing, Chris Krous, Aleksandar Hemon) and why. For Lerner drawing on factual details from your own life (to write novels) "makes sense in a world that is so obsessed with self-curation and the image of the avatar that so many people live by"; he sees literature as "a slower, more thoughtful, more complicated, more nuanced version of that", a way "to try to think about actually the way a self is constructed, presented, what part of our identities are changeable and variable fictions. […] a way of opening a window in that cultural obsession in other faster media" (*The Guardian Podcast)*. Lerner understands the charge that writing about yourself is narcissistic, but for him "it is also acknowledging the particularities of your experience and your vision, and resisting a kind of historical universality" (*The Guardian Podcast*). This acknowledgement is paramount considering that it is precisely the exposition of the self that now conveys the authenticity of the narration. *The Topeka School* calls attention to the contemporary crisis of masculinity. In order to explore (and expose) "the ways in which that terror of not being real men (whatever that means) causes people to regress into different kinds of modes of violent self-assertion", you need, Lerner says, to be "working with the material you are most embarrassed about, you can feel ashamed about and making that material for art" (*The Guardian Podcast*). This is the raw material that makes "the temperature in the room go up" (to quote again from Shields 77) so that the narrator-character can empathically involve the readers and make them identify – moving from the level of her/his own reality to that of the fictional truth, which is how the novel works. In this sense "autofiction" (as observed by Donnarumma (136) with regard to Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock)* "sarebbe dunque un modo per ridare forze ai meccanismi del romanzo".

The raw material. “Write yourself naked, from exile, and in blood”, said Shields (182), firmly believing that only nonfiction – the lyrical essay, the memoir – can capture authenticity. And yet it was the fictional world of the Neapolitan Quartet, with their shockingly honest exploration of feelings, which felt authentic for millions of readers worldwide. Ferrante writes with “a ferocity that is shockingly honest, unnervingly blunt” (*Booklist)*. James Wood in his 2013 article also underlined this raw, confessional urgency: “Her novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader” (‘Women on the Verge’). The raw element is the unpleasant, disturbing but ever-present component of her style:

> 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’ (fran 217-18)

> When I write 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” (fr 235).

It is not only a matter of content – for example the messiness of female friendship or the taboo of maternal love – but also a matter of language, which can be deliberately ‘unartistic’:

> Una pagina è ben scritta quando la fatica e il piacere di raccontare con verità hanno avuto la meglio su qualsiasi altra preoccupazione, anche la preoccupazione dell’eleganza formale.

> Appertango alla categoria di chi butta via la bella copia e salva la brutta, se questa assicura più autenticità. (fran 342)

> A page is well written when 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 (fr 235).

This is Ferrante's trademark but it is also what links her to these contemporary self-narratives including *My Struggle*: "trad[ing] in nakedness, sometimes nastiness" is, according to a critic (Gaby Wood) what she has in common with Knausgård). They share the same preoccupation with authenticity and the same disregard for 'beauty': "Non mi interessa il bello scrivere, mi interessa scrivere" (fran 298; "Beautiful writing doesn't interest me; writing interests me", fr 308). "Beauty is a problem in that it imparts a kind of hope" echoes Knausgård (*The End* 167).

Self-reflection (and/or activism?). The raw material of domestic abuse is what led Meena Kandasamy to write her second novel *When I Hit you: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, a story, between fiction and nonfiction, of the narrator's isolation and abuse at the hands of her husband: it is an indictment of a lot of women in contemporary Indian society but also a compelling meditation on writing, a *Künstlerroman* (flagged by the Joycian subtitle). *When I Hit you* was her second novel and her breakthrough success. Kandasamy however, was troubled by its reception (*Exquisite Cadavers* 1-2): "By describing it, offhandedly and repeatedly as a memoir, some reviewers were side-stepping the entire artistic edifice on which the work stood, and were instead solely defining me by my experience: raped Indian woman, beaten-up wife": she felt "angered that as a woman writer I was not even given the autonomy of deciding the genre to which the book I had spent years writing belonged". Kandasamy was also weary of the label of autobiography because

this is how women's writing is always seen or filtered through, and it is a way to minimise it; it is a way to move it "from the larger open spaces of the artwork to the smaller spaces of the self", to use the words of Jeanette Winterson (in her article entitled 'The malice and sexism behind the "unmasking" of Elena Ferrante', Winterson aptly points the finger to what is a sexist prejudice rooted in literary criticism: "I like to read myself as a fiction as well as a fact. […] When men do it, it is called meta-fiction and part of their playful experiment. When women do it, it is called autobiography".) Kandasamy experienced a double discrimination: about gender but also about race: "To a western audience, writers like me are interesting because: we are from a place where horrible things happen, or horrible things have happened to us, or a combination of the above. {…] No one treats us as writers, only as diarists who survive (*Exquisite Cadavers* 10). In *Exquisite Cadavers* she elaborates on the reception of *When I Hit You* and deliberately pushes forward the collision of facts and fiction: in the central column of the page there is an invented tale, on the external margins of the page Kandasamy's reflections on the use of fiction, her appeals to the readers, and Reuters reports and lists of people, friends, imprisoned or killed by the Indian government. The real emerges from the fictional, the domestic is all at one with the political, the reflection on writing becomes the space for the narrator to establish herself, to question her role: not only that of an autofiction writer but also that of a political novelist, an activist.

The reflection on writing that distinguishes the contemporary self-narratives of Kandasamy, Ferrante, Lerner and Knausgård – which, we have seen, deliberately play at the border between fiction and nonfiction – powerfully calls into question the world outside the text. Their works are autofictions, autobiographical novels, first-person novels: a revisitation of the *Künstlerroman*, yes, but which is very much driven to say something about our present and to say it with a certain urgency. What Donnarumma (160) said about the autofictions of Siti and other Italian writers could be applied to these four authors: "mettendo in scena l'artificio e doppiando la narrazione con la

riflessione su di essa, smontano in modi diversi le pretese di un realismo di primo grado, ma pretendono comunque di dire qualcosa di decisivo sul presente; affidano alla letteratura un compito di verità".[iii] Kandasamy is blunt in mixing the domestic with the political, but so is Ferrante. What seems to be less pronounced in the self-reflective novels of the 'late modernity' – I endorse Donnarumma's argument that we can no longer speak of postmodernism for the literature of the new millennium – is that sense of playfulness that indeed characterised their postmodern predecessors (including the most serious or sombre like Italo Calvino). I will now narrow down my analysis to the reflection on writing in Knausgård and Ferrante.

2. *Künstlerroman* of 'late modernity': Ferrante and Knausgård

A comparative analysis between *My Struggle* and the Neapolitan Quartet is not new. Even before Ferrante fever had officially started Joshua Rothman in *The New Yorker* observed that "[t]he titanic novelists of the current literary moment are Elena Ferrante and Karl Ove Knausgård, and the temptation to compare them is just as irresistible. Like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Knausgård and Ferrante are equal geniuses whose books embody opposed values". And yet, Rothman continued "[r]ivalry depends on similarity" and in fact Knausgård and Ferrante are "strikingly similar. It's not just that they've both written addictive multi-volume chronicles through which Americans can imagine their alternate European lives. It's that their novels explore similar themes and even tell similar stories. Karl Ove and Elena have a core set of experiences in common" (Rothman). Among these experiences in common, Rothman mentioned: "patriarchy, especially as it is manifested in male violence"; the fact that these are also books about banality, domesticity and everydayness; the theme of fear; and finally the fact that they are metafictional books ("both Karl Ove and Elena are writers (and authorial alter-egos)") which dramatize the writerly struggle.

A second article in 2016 underlines the peculiarity of the reading experience: “we are suffering from a double addiction”, says Gaby Wood. “The hunger for the latest instalment of Karl Ove Knausgård's six-part sequence of autobiographical novels, *My Struggle*, is matched only by the thirst for Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels, of which there are four”. Other features in common, according to Wood are: the shockingly honest exploration of feelings, of types that are usually not discussed, and then the fact that “[b]oth aim to dismantle the distance between truth and fiction, and, in both cases, their authenticity derives less from a historical tradition of realism than a certain urgency in the writing”.

Finally, for Inge van de Ven (2020 134) the comparison is noteworthy because it shows how Knausgård and Ferrante ‘destabilize’ traditional conceptions of gender: “both narrators model themselves after masculine authorship that they do not fit. The both render visible gender identities and behaviour that were unseen before”.

I agree with these studies that reading Ferrante and Knausgård alongside each other is compelling. Not only for the reasons listed above but specifically because a comparative analysis makes more visible their contribution to the novel, a genre whose boundaries they are pushing forward, reinventing, and at the same time laying bare for us to reflect on. I will focus on the reflection on the process of writing which is central both in *My Struggle* (Toril Moi points out that “*My Struggle* is nothing if not a reflection on art and writing”) and in the Neapolitan Quartet, which I read as a novel of formation – and, after the postmodern, 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’ (Santovetti 532).

Although Knausgård and Ferrante start from two opposite angles (the first writing an autobiography that wants to be read as a novel, the latter writing a fictional story that is read as “una continua estesa autobiografia” (de Rogatis, ‘Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy’ 295), in their work

they ponder on similar issues: what are the implications of using autobiographical material? How can writing preserve the 'raw element' while it gives it the shape of fiction? The collision of real and fictional and the preoccupation with authenticity seem to me the main issues of the *Künstlerroman* of 'late modernity', a period dealing not only with globalization but also with the omnipresence of digital media, the age – to go back to the issues raised by *Reality Hunger* – "when technology and politics have rendered the line between fiction and nonfiction nearly impossible to distinguish" (Marche). By examining their work in parallel we will also see how their works resist and challenge "a whole host of ingrained attitudes in contemporary literary studies" (as Toril Moi observed in relation to *My Struggle*), including the idea that if a book is popular, readable by a non-expert, it can't be of good quality; the idea that a type of reading, based on immersion, empathy and identification, is a modality suitable for children or readers of popular fiction; the opposition between narration and anti-narration (still very much present in Shields' manifesto); the idea that literary value resides in style (both Ferrante and Knausgård have been accused of being 'unartistic'). The debates that their receptions have provoked show that reading *My Struggle* and the Neapolitan Quartet with the parameters of postmodernism is problematic and fail to appreciate what these writers are doing.

3. The collision of real and fictional: from Ferrante to Knausgård

The collision of real and fictional is a constant theme in Ferrante's works both in novels and essays. Let us take this passage from *Frantumaglia:*

> '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 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. (fran 55-56)

> I am used to writing as if it were a matter of dividing up the booty. To one character I give a trait of Tom's, to another a phrase of Dick's; I reproduce situations in which people I know and have known have actually been. I draw on real situations and events but not as they really happened; rather, I assume as having “really happened” only the impressions or fantasies that originate in the years when that experience was lived. So what I write is full of references to situations and events that are real and verifiable but reorganized and reinvented as if they had never happened. (fr 60)

By using an ambiguous metaphor, as that of the booty, to explain the process of transfiguration of reality at the core of any artistic creation, Ferrante signals her ambivalence about it and points out the dangers underlying this operation:

> 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. (fran, 55-56)

> The farther I am from my writing, then, the more it becomes what it wants to be: a novelistic invention. The closer I get, and inside it, the more overwhelmed the novel is by real details, and

> the book stops being a novel, and risks wounding me, above all, as the malicious account of a disrespectful ingrate (fr 60).

This situation is fictionalised in the Neapolitan Quartet. It is of course Elena Greco, the fictional writer, who does fall into the trap and pays dearly for it: at the end of *The Story of the Lost Child*, Elena confesses that it is after – and because of? – *A Friendship* (her last novel which was "ambientato al rione e che raccontava la storia di Tina" ("set in the neighbourhood and told the story of Tina") that Lila disappears; Elena now "detesta" ("hates") the story she has written; she hates it because she realises she has betrayed her friend, who "mi aveva fatto promettere che non avrei mai scritto di lei. Invece, ecco, lo avevo fatto, e lo avevo fatto nel modo più diretto" ("had made her promise that she would never write about her. Instead, here, she had done it, and she had done it in the most direct way"). 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 "si vende ancor oggi molto bene" ("still sells well today")) making a spectacle of her life (all quotes from sbp 230-1; slc 233-34). This passage is a classic *mise en abyme* and it does have the effect of puzzling the readers, caught in this duplication of stories within a story (the story the readers are finishing, *The Story of the Lost Child* and the fictional story they are reading about, *A Friendship*). We are left pondering: is Elena really sorry or just manipulative? Is a friendship a price to pay for writing? Is Elena, the real writer, as manipulative as Elena the fictional writer? My opinion is that Ferrante is not using the *mise en abyme* to dazzle us in a postmodern game of mirrors, making us believe that everything is manipulation, fiction. Rather, Ferrante here is giving us a quite fair assessment of what writing entails, not a Romantic or idealised version of it, but writing in its banal and dirty secrets: an operation that can wound the self as well as others. Ferrante stated in an interview:

> Quando si scrive veramente, i legami più a rischio sono proprio quelli stretti, di sangue, d'amore, d'amicizia. Le persone che ci restano vicine nella scrittura, fino al punto di accettarne anche gli effetti più crudeli e devastanti, si contano sulla punta delle dita. (fran 169)

> When one writes truthfully, the ties most at risk are precisely the close ones, of blood, of love, of friendship. The people who stay near us in writing, to the point of accepting even the most cruel and devastating effects, can be counted on the tips of one's fingers. (fr 177)

Besides, explains Ferrante in a more recent article entitled 'The False and the True', there is another thing that makes it difficult to "tracciare una linea di demarcazione tra storie vere e storie di invenzione" (ioc 17; "trace a line of separation between fiction and nonfiction", ini 17): this is that "Ogni uso letterario della scrittura, per via della sua congenita artificialità, comporta sempre una qualche forma di finzione" (ioc 18; "writing is innately artificial, its every use involves some form of fiction", ini 18). What is being betrayed is not a person near the writer, a friend – like Lila in the above passage – but instead reality itself, the 'raw material', which has been domesticated and given a coherent shape, to be made into fiction. The ambivalent power of writing is brilliantly embodied by the duo Elena-Lila (a dual narration that is captivating because inherently unreliable: there is "sempre Lila a mettere perfidamente in dubbio sia la qualità del lavoro di Elena, sia la sua attendibilità di narratrice", Gambaro 176).[iv] Writing fiction, lectures Elena, means to give shape and order to the chaos, it means "incollare un fatto a un altro con le parole, e alla fine tutto deve sembrare coerente anche se non lo è" (sbp 246; "paste one fact to another with words and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not", slc 232): it takes Lila, her brilliant friend, her double, to remind her that this order, this coherence, is a fiction, a lie ("Ma se la coerenza non c'è, perché fingere?"; "But if the coherence isn't there, why pretend?"), and that underneath there is the void, the reality collapsing, dissolving, breaking into pieces. The duo Elena-Lila embodies the

double power of writing fiction: it can normalise and reassure, compromising the authenticity of reality, or, as Elena grasps all of a sudden, it can "mimare la banalità scoordinata, antiestetica, illogica, sformata, delle cose" (sbp 292; "imitate the disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical, shapeless banality of things", slc 215). What is compelling in Ferrante's reflection on writing is that the text thrives in the tension between 'false' and 'true', in its ambivalence, and yet never puts in doubt that "one writes truthfully" (in this there are miles of separation from, for example, the postmodern idea of Manganelli of literature as deception). Not only does she not adhere to the postmodern idea that everything is fiction, but she is also weary of fiction too: as she says in an interview with Lagioia:

> Non credo però 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. (fr 363)

> 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. (fr 373)

Knausgård too toys with the line between autobiography and fiction. Ben Lerner – today the much-talked-about author of *The Topeka School* – was intrigued by "the radical inclusiveness, the style-less style, the apparently equal fascination with everything" ('Each Cornflake') so that Knausgård can describe a bowl of cornflakes or his brother's face with the same level of detail. To describe Knausgård's operation he says: "he's like a child who has taken Henry James' injunction to novelists – 'be one of the people on whom nothing is lost' – literally; he appears to just write down

everything he can recall (and he appears to recall everything)". According to van de Ven (113) this means that the open-endedness of the database has taken over any principle of narrative selection, hence, the lists, the digressions, the long descriptions that turn into essayistic pieces, the series of events repeated and recorded as if to reflect "the contemporary urge to collect, archive, store, and record "everything"". Is it an autobiography? If it is, it is a very peculiar one, and not only for its monumental size (6 volumes and 3600 pages) but because of its paradoxical premise (which do without any principle of selection in the organization of the narrative material):

> I want to evoke all the things that are a part of our lives, but not of our stories—the washing up, the changing of diapers, the in-between-things—and make them glow. Though a five-page description of what's in a closet is not exactly page-turner stuff, I thought of this project as a kind of experiment in realistic prose. How far is it possible to go into detail before the novel cracks and becomes unreadable? ('Bookforum Talks With Karl Ove Knausgård')

Knausgård wants to record his everyday life in its utmost details, he swears that everything he writes has actually happened, and then he drops in that there are many gaps ("the years 1969-1974 are a great big hole in my life" *Boyhood Island 10*), that he never took notes ("Now I had burned all the diaries and notes I had written, there was barely a trace of the person I was until I turned twenty-five, and rightly so", *A Death in the Family* 312), and most crucially that memory is a form of fiction:

> Memory is not a reliable quantity in life. And it isn't for the simple reason that memory doesn't prioritise the truth. It is never the demands for truth that determines whether memory recalls an action accurately or not. It is self-interest that does. Memory is pragmatic, it is sly

> and artful, but not in any hostile or malicious ways; on the contrary, it does everything it can to keep its host satisfied. (*Boyhood Island* 10)

My Struggle is an experiment in realistic prose; it is also driven by a sense of weariness of fiction ("It seemed to me that fiction was everywhere—TV-news, newspapers, films, and books all provide a flood of stories, a continuous dramatization of the world. So what I did, naïvely, was to try to take the world back", 'Bookforum Talks With Karl Ove Knausgård'). However, fiction is clearly used to reconstruct the many gaps and Knausgård does borrow the conventions of the novel by fictionalizing scenes and dialogue. Autofiction? Where the book's hero and the author's name are identical, and the material for the book, although it can use the devices of fiction, must come from autobiographical sources? Yes, and no, and Knausgård never uses this category (he is also adamant that all his facts correspond to reality, which is not the case in many autofictions). More than autofiction: not only is his name real, but "[he] had used people's real names" for all his characters (*The End* 176). Is he a "kind of literary vampire" (*The End* 180)? Like Elena with Lila? "This novel has hurt everyone around me" (*The End* 1010): his uncle took him to court, his then current wife suffered a breakdown and ended up in a psychiatric hospital (all recorded in the novel); other people took it more lightly: his first wife made a documentary about being a character in his books. Knausgård did send manuscripts to the people appearing as characters and they had the option to have the name changed or something removed. Not the children, though, and he knows that "in a few years when they are old enough to read it, it will hurt" them as well. And yet "If I had made it more painful, it would have been truer" (*The End* 1010). Why? What is at stake? It takes all the last volume, *The End. My Struggle: Book 6* to elaborate a reply to this crucial question (the whole volume 6 is a reflection on the repercussions of the writing of *My Struggle* on his life and that of his family). And the novel does crack. Knausgård knows that he has broken one of the most important conventions, the pact with the reader:

> That is the pact, the author is free to say whatever he or she wants because the author knows that what he or she says will never, or at least should never, be linked with the author, with his or her private person. It is a necessary pact that the books, which provoked such a sensation and such anger, broke. I wrote them because my commitment to the novel wasn't enough for me, I wanted to go a step further and commit to reality. (*The End* 977).

The collusion between the facts of his life and the fiction brought in by the act of writing, could not be more dramatic (nor more dramatised). Knausgård does not mind; what he does care about is to keep digging for the truth, the 'raw element', whatever it takes: "My commitment was to reality, what I wrote about had really happened and it had happened as described" (*The End* 977). It is interesting to note that Ferrante too is ready to prioritise the truth over the fate of the novel (although for the Italian writer they are not incompatible): "A me non interessano, devo dire, le sorti del romanzo. Mi interessa, credo, una scrittura di verità. Cosa ardua e sempre più rara, ma anche l'unica in grado di dimostrare, come secondo me riesce a Knausgård, che il romanzo non è morto". (fr 286; "I'm not interested, I have to say, in the fate of the novel. What interests me, I think, is a writing of truth. It's an arduous and increasingly rare thing, but also the only one that can demonstrate, as in my view Knausgård does, that the novel isn't dead", fr 296).

4. Knausgård: the raw material

What is the 'raw material' for which Knausgård is ready to sacrifice everything, from literary beliefs to the people he loves? Let us step back and start from the very beginning of his 'anti-literary' project (Ben Lerner's definition). *A Death in the Family* (Book 1) starts with a reflection on the passage from life to death ("For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it

stops"), it follows in detail all the changes that precede the decomposition of the body: "the moment life departs the body, it belongs to death" (*Death in the Family* 3). He is preparing us – or himself – for the moment in which Karl Ove, the narrator-protagonist, goes to the funeral parlour and sees the body of his alcoholic father, an estranged father, who used his patriarchal power to humiliate his son. It feels like this scene – of the son moving around and looking at the corpse of his father – is repeated over and over in the book: he goes back to it, he anticipates, he dreads this moment. This opening is more abstract but it is leading to it. But not immediately. In fact, it is followed by a flashback of Karl Ove when he was eight years old watching television alone on a spring day: the news is showing, there are images of a search-and-rescue operation at sea. The boy "stares at the surface of the sea without listening to what the reporter is saying, *and suddenly the outline of a face emerges*"; this has "a huge impact on [him]: 'the moment the *face* disappears [he gets] up to find someone [he] can tell" (*Death in the Family* 7). Now this scene has been interpreted as the incursion of the transcendent (the father ironically asks if it was the face of Jesus Christ). However, this can also allude to something else. Particularly if we read this passage as an exemplification of a metaphor which we find a few pages ahead: "Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out, but the there itself. There, that is writing's location and aim. But how to get there?" (*Death in the Family* 172). This metaphor is not dissimilar to Ferrante's idea of "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" (fr 217-18; "pulling up from the depths of her experience that which is alive and writhing, including what I myself have driven away as far as possible because it seemed unbearable", fr 352): in both cases we are dealing with the unsayable, in the two meanings as 'things that we don't want to say' but also the 'things that we do not have the capacity to say', the irrational, the 'thing hideously behind' as Henry James famously put it. With literature we circumscribe the unsayable, trying to put it into words, but we can only get glimpses of

it – like Lila with her *smarginature*; or like Karl Ove, the narrator-protagonist, circling around the body in the funeral parlour and having all kinds of thoughts (a kind of a slow-motion *smarginatura*). In fact, the whole Book 1 pivots around this key scene. This is exactly the point of the book: writing the death of the father. He repeats this over and over: "I wanted to tell the story of my father, of his fall from being a respected member of society to a drunk dying in a chair in his mother's house without anything left" ('Bookforum Talks With Karl Ove Knausgård'). Writing is originated by an erasure: be it the disappearance of Lila in the Neapolitan Quartet or the death of the father in *My Struggle*.[v] Elena writes to bring Lila back, Karl Ove to unravel the traumatic relationship with his father, its 'unbearable' essence. What is interesting though is that writing is never intended as a coming to terms with the loss or the trauma; in fact, it is the place where the loss/trauma is relived again and again.

This is Knausgård's 'raw element', the one he wants to write with utmost fidelity. But "how to get there?" he asks at the end of the passage. A 2014 interview with Andrew O'Hagan provides some interesting ideas. "The experience when my father died was very intense", he says. "I tried to write it as fiction, as a straight novel. I did that for four years, at least: writing every day, failing, failing, failing". The problem was that "there was too much form, too much narration, too much calculation, and the experience was so raw". It is intriguing that the discourse is articulated in the same way as the duo Lila-Elena did in the Neapolitan Quartet: the problem of writing is that of giving form to a chaotic jumble of emotion without losing its rawness, without simplifying, banalising it; giving shape to the shapeless without compromising the authenticity of reality. When Knausgård wrote something that his publisher defined as "manic self-confession", he had an idea: "what if", he postulated, "I could expand this into a novel. A diary with the novelistic-story-telling?" ('Karl Ove Knausgård talking to Andrew O'Hagan'). *My Struggle* might not be a fiction, but it has the power – typical of good novels – to create a powerful "immersive world" for the

reader to inhabit (‘Bookforum Talks With Karl Ove Knausgård). A world, with real names, real people, in which facts and fiction combine in a new, dangerous way.

I don’t see Knausgård’s operation as a rejection of the novel. Lerner called it a literary suicide but that was in 2014 when the last instalment of the project was not yet translated into English. In Book 6, *The End,* we find, if possible, a rehabilitation of the novel (moving beyond the still-postmodern categories used by David Shields): “for me the novel provides a means of thinking radically different from that of the essay, the article or the thesis, because reflection in the novel is not hierarchically superior as a pathway to understanding, but coordinates with all the other elements in it” (*The End* 173). This becomes particularly clear when Knausgård compares what he has done in Book 1 of *My Struggle* to Peter Handke’s effort to avoid the literary in his book about his mother, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams: A Life Story*:

> The important thing for Handke was to describe his mother without traducing her, which is to say without intervening in what was singular to her, out of respect for her integrity. To me this was not a good thought at all, since I had written about a similar set of events in my own life and had done so in a way that was almost diametrically opposed to Handke’s, reaching continually towards affect, feeling, the sentimental in contrast to the rational, and dramatising my father, allowing him to be a character in a story, representing him in the same way as fictional characters are represented, by concealing the ‘as if’ on which all literature depends, and thereby traducing him and his integrity in the most basic of ways, by saying that was him. (*The End* 172).

This praise for the novel comes unexpectedly, but it is reiterated in this volume and I believe it bears particular importance because it can account for the emotional urgency (“affect, feeling, the

sentimental") that for writers like Knausgård (who is "at pains to free himself from, namely the formalism of late modernism, or, if one prefers, postmodernism" (Moi)) has become a priority:

> I could have written an article about all this, but it wouldn't have said much because arguments have got to be rational, and this is about the opposite, the irrational, all the feelings we have about what it means to confront what has withered away into death, and that actually is". (*The End* 178)

5. Ferrante: a disturbing writing

For Ferrante too writing is the recovery of the "unbearable", the unsayable, the raw material that needs to be "pull[ed] up from the depths of [our] experience" and which "is alive and writhing". For the persistence of this element of rawness, her writing has been described "una lettura irresistibile ma "disturbante"" (fr 217: "irresistible but "disturbing"", fr 226). Disturbing is the correct word: indeed Ferrante's stroke of genius is to have revitalised the novel, the traditional novel, with this disturbing force. While Knausgård is weary of the novel, he wants to make it crack (although he cannot do without it), Ferrante moves confidently within its tradition. Her innovation is from within: she mixes high and low art ("Considero la tradizione letteraria come un unico grande deposito, dove chi ha voglia di scrivere va a scegliersi ciò che gli serve, senza preclusioni", fran 260; "I think of literary tradition as a single large depository, where anyone who wants to write goes to choose what is useful to him, without excluding anything", fr 269); she recovers the melodrama, the *feuilleton*, only to dissect and sabotage it. This happens because the raw element, the disturbing force has been incorporated into the narrative structure. The Neapolitan Quartet becomes a field of forces; it is crossed by two different drives, two conceptions which counterbalance each other: two ways to tell a story, two visions of the world, Elena and Lila, linearity and non-linearity, shape and shapelessness, order and *smarginatura*, one is a negation of the other, one is nothing without the

other, what matters is their coming together, their collaboration: indeed "la scrittura acquista intensità quando la narratrice mescola la propria voce a quella fantasmatica dell'amica" (Gambaro 175-76).[vi] As de Rogatis ('For Elena Ferrante') has pointed out "[t]he main narration becomes polyphonic, dual, accommodating within Elena's voice the voice of the *other*—of the missing friend whom Elena conjures". In narrative terms Elena and Lila embody two different patterns of narration: Lila's model, the one that leaves abysses, dissolves borders, is the one that "transforms a plot with the highest novelistic potential […] into a story which is deliberately, avowedly, an antinovel" (Micali 18). Novel and antinovel: one resisting the other, one compensating for the other – as in the best tradition of the novel. The great merit of Ferrante is to have shown (in times where anti-narrative is still the rallying cry, at least judging by the popularity of Shields' manifesto) that "novels with clear plots can still be full of ambiguity, darkness, doubts" (Morrison) – that fiction is good when it shows "signs of first-hand knowledge of the terror" (fr 373).

Ferrante's reflection on writing – her 'female Künstlerroman' – also has another dimension and another objective. Ferrante's scholars have amply demonstrated "her distinct feminist matrix" (de Rogatis, *Key Words* 289), the way in which her novels 'issue a powerful form of resistance that renegotiates and reframes history from a feminine point of view' (Katrin Wehling Giorgi 210). The "disturbing" writing of Ferrante should be also seen as a provocation by the woman writer battling with a male literary tradition.

> Credo però che se una scrittrice vuole rendere il massimo, debba imporsi una sorta di scontentezza programmatica. Ci confrontiamo con giganti. La tradizione letteraria maschile è ricchissima di opere meravigliose, e propone una forma sua per tutto il possibile. Chi vuole scrivere deve conoscerla a fondo e imparare a riusarla forzandola secondo le necessità. La battaglia con la materia grezza della nostra esperienza di donne esige innanzitutto

> competenza. In più bisogna combattere la soggezione e cercarci una nostra genealogia letteraria con sfrontatezza, anzi con superbia. (fran 333)

> I do think, though, that if a woman writer wants to achieve her utmost, she has to impose on herself a sort of systematic dissatisfaction. We compare ourselves with giants. The male literary tradition has an abundance of marvelous works, and offers a form for everything possible. The would-be writer must know the tradition thoroughly and 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. (fr 342-43)

The woman writer not only “must know the tradition thoroughly” but she needs “to learn to reuse it, bending it as needed”. And for that she will need all the disturbing force that she is capable of. But it is never enough. Hence her “systematic dissatisfaction”. Which is of course that of Elena Greco in the Neapolitan Quartet, always, painfully, dissatisfied. This “systematic dissatisfaction” is also metaliterary awareness: the woman writer is under no illusion regarding, for example, the redeeming power of fiction. As Gambaro (176) has aptly observed ‘se l’impresa di scrittura, e dunque la conquista di un’identità liberata, germina dalla rivisitazione incessante del rimosso, allora davvero nessun progresso, nessuna *Bildung* è forse realmente possibile’. Ferrante cannot believe in therapeutic writing nor that through writing one can always rise above the chaos and contingency of our circumstances. In fact, as Jon Baskin has pointed out, “the singular relevance of her fiction lies in the way it incorporates the rationalist impulse while at the same time challenging our habitual assumption that it lights the path to a life of independence or autonomy”. And yet, there is something bold, and something militant in this state of “systematic dissatisfaction”. Ferrante is inviting the readers to join, to “seek a literary genealogy of our own”. The concept of female

genealogy is a key concept of the 1980s theory of sexual difference of Luce Irigaray and in Italy of Luisa Muraro (and several studies have examined the influence of this movement in Ferrante's work, including Stiliana Milkova 'Artistic Traditions' and 'Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics', Elena Sotgiu and Isabella Pinto). "If we are not to be accomplice in the murder of the mother" – which is at the origin of patriarchy – "we also need to assert that there is a genealogy of women" (Muraro 322). This is a double genealogy: "a vertical one, the genealogical mother-daughter axis, and a horizontal one, the well-known axis of sisterhood" (Muraro 323). Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet embodies perfectly this concept (indeed one could hint that the adjective in the Italian title, *L'Amica geniale* and 'genealogia/genealogy' are no coincidence). The vertical genealogy is the mother and daughter line dear to Ferrante in her previous work (see Milkova's close reading of *L'amore molesto* in 'Artistic Traditions'). In the Neapolitan Quartet the imagery of Elena that "zoppic[a] per non far morire del tutto [sua] madre" (sbp 350; "limps in order not to let her mother die completely", slc 254*)* is a potent remainder of this recovery. Similarly, what better exemplification can we find of the horizontal line, than the brilliant friendship – *geniale* in Italian – between Lila and Elena? On this concept of female genealogy Ferrante returns over and over in her essays (in the interviews collected in *Frantumaglia*, in the shorter pieces written for the *Guardian* and now collected in *Incidental inventions*). What emerges from these reflections is an idea of writing as a way to put in practice the feminist concept of female genealogy: writing to subvert the literary field which for centuries has been colonized by men; writing "to construct instead a potent genealogy of our own, a female genealogy" (fer[6]); writing to repair, symbolically, the alliance with the mother, giving her a voice after the centuries of silencing.

Conclusion

Return of the real? My answer is yes, the real is back but as is the case with both Ferrante and Knausgård it will never be a plain, old-fashioned or naive form of realism. It is a commitment to

reality that invests deeply in the forms of representation and not simply the content (as we have seen in the analysis of the innovative characteristics of *My Struggle* and the Neapolitan Quartet). It is a form of realism that is always accompanied by a meditation, a self-reflection, on the forms and on the relationship between the fictional world and the real world. However, Ferrante and Knausgård, together with their tormented, perennially dissatisfied fictional alter-ego, are painfully aware (and both have dramatised this in their works) that realism, in the sense of getting closer to reality, capturing the raw element, can never be achieved but remains a tension, a 'hunger' (Shields) which will never be appeased.

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[i] “have seen and are seeing, not only in Europe and the United States, a fictional production of exceptional quality”.

[ii] "If subjectivism and narration in the first person have become almost institutional in such a large part of contemporary Italian fiction, it is because the self, in its fragility, seems to be the only remaining good in front of the broken world”

[iii] “staging the artifice and doubling the narration with the reflection on it; they dismantle in different ways the claims of a first degree realism, but still demand to say something decisive about the present; they entrust to literature a task of truth”.

[iv] “it will always be Lila who wickedly casts doubts both on the quality of Elena’s work and her reliability as a storyteller”.

[v] On the theme of disappearance and erasure in Ferrante there is now a significant scholarship. See in particular: Verbaro, ‘Cancellature. Il caso Elena Ferrante/5’; Wehling-Giorgi, Milkova, ‘Elena Ferrante’s Visual Poetics’; Santovetti, ‘”Io non ci sto”. Elena Ferrante, the theme of erasure and the *smarginatura* as poetics of resistance’; de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante’s Key Words,* ch.8, pp.203-38 (in particular 233-37).

[vi] “writing acquires intensity only when the narrator mixes her own voice to the phantasmatic voice of her brilliant friend”.

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