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The Translator's Visibility or the Ferrante-Goldstein Phenomenon

In this essay, I examine the value of Elena Ferrante's tetralogy, the *Neapolitan Novels*, from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, I propose that the phenomenon of *Ferrante fever* and the commercial success of the novels in the United States are culturally valuable, for they have increased the visibility of translated fiction and, by extension, brought to light the work of the translator as well. The popularity of translated fiction is rare in the United States where both publishers and readers tend to overlook serious literature not written originally in English. On the other hand, I suggest that Ferrante's four novels articulate a compelling model of feminine creativity which credits and displays women's artistic work. The novels' success and their primarily female readership corroborate the value of this model. Its validation can be found in the linkage established between two creative, successful women, Elena Ferrante and her translator, Ann Goldstein.

Americans rarely read translated literature. In my experience, even educated, well-read Americans ignore it or do not notice it. Works in translation are relatively invisible in the American literary market. Translation has less currency in America's cultural economy, it brings fewer explicit or implicit benefits to its readers, it commands lesser value. This is partly because, conditioned by demand, presses in America focus primarily on literature written in English. Only about 3% of books published in the United States are works in translation. And this minuscule number shrinks further when we realize that the majority of these translations are technical texts or reprints of classics; only 0.7% are in fact first-time translations of literary fiction and poetry.¹ These numerical values testify to a culture in which literary works in translation do not possess intrinsic worth or appreciate over time. If translated works are unnoticeable to the general American readership, the translator's presence together with the arduous intellectual, linguistic, and cultural work entailed in translation, is completely invisible. The translator's labor is effaced twice: once metaphorically as it submits to the reigning demands for fluency and readability in the target language, and then again, quite literally, in the typographic deemphasis of the translator's name on the book cover or elsewhere in the text. As translation studies scholar and translator

1 The website «Three Percent» provides statistics along with a database of translations published in the United States: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepcent/index.php?s=about> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

Lawrence Venuti claims, translation continues to be an invisible practice, omnipresent but rarely acknowledged.²

And yet the past two years have witnessed the success of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels and the public's fascination with Ferrante's unknown identity, a phenomenon that has been termed *Ferrante fever*. This alliterative phrase is a hashtag on twitter, a facebook page, a pin on Pinterest, a visible presence in social media. It is a publicity strategy embraced by Ferrante's American publisher, Europa Editions, a tactical trope which at once describes and sustains the phenomenon itself. The elusive Italian woman writer, whose real identity is a closely kept secret, has gained enormous and enormously surprising popularity among American readers with her four recent novels, translated from Italian by Ann Goldstein. In fact, these four novels, *My Brilliant Friend* (*L'amica geniale*, 2011), *The Story of a New Name* (*Storia del nuovo cognome*, 2012), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 2013), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 2014) have accrued such cultural capital that they have become signifiers of value for a wide range of readers.

After *My Brilliant Friend* came out in English in 2012, the noted literary critic James Wood extolled Ferrante's early fiction and called attention to her new novel in a 2013 article in «The New Yorker». His cursory identification of Ann Goldstein as an editor at «The New Yorker» was the first acknowledgment of the translator's mediating role in giving readers access to Ferrante's texts. Then «Foreign Policy» named Elena Ferrante one of the world's global leading thinkers for 2014, «for writing honest, anonymous [sic] fiction».³ Beginning in 2014, interviews with Ferrante and reviews dedicated to the *Neapolitan Novels* have appeared in both the popular press and in highbrow American magazines, journals, newspapers, and websites: «Vogue», «The New York Times», «The Paris Review», «The Wall Street Journal», «Entertainment Weekly», «Vanity Fair», «n+1», «The Los Angeles Review of Books» and «Slate», among others. Moreover, the books were commercially successful. In September 2015, the much anticipated and publicized fourth novel, *The Story of the Lost Child* was third on the «New York Times» bestseller list, while the first novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, has occupied third to eighth positions on the list for 23 weeks.⁴

It is remarkable that Ferrante's novels have surpassed the stage of best-selling sensational literature in translation (such as, for example, Stieg

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2 L. Venuti, *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, Routledge, New York 1992. See also, L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Routledge, New York 1995, 2008.

3 *A World Disrupted: The Leading Global Thinkers of 2014*, in «Foreign Policy», 6th Annual Special Issue, 2014, <http://globalthinkers.foreignpolicy.com/#chroniclrs/detail/ferrante> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

4 *Best Sellers*, in «The New York Times», September 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/trade-fiction-paperback/list.html> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

Larsson's trilogy *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) and acquired cult status. The publication of the last of the four novels became a cultural event. On September 20, 2015, «The New Republic» ran an article titled *Ferrante Fever Hits New York City*, discussing the literary events organized at bookstores to mark the publication of *The Story of the Lost Child*. A couple of weeks earlier, *Ferrante fever* had been covered by «The New Yorker»'s website where an article reported on the book release celebration in a Brooklyn bookstore: «This was a party, in the tradition established by the Harry Potter series, for books whose fan bases have become ravenous. A small table was set up in the middle of the shop with olives, cheeses, Italian wines, and free buttons that said “Ferrante Fever” in neon pink». ⁵ The comparison to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series which generated its own reader cult (and an industry of film adaptations, prequels, sequels, and merchandise) is telling.

The cult of Elena Ferrante has conferred a canonical status to the *Neapolitan Novels*. «The New York Times Book Review» spearheaded the process by naming *The Story of the Lost Child* one of the ten best books of 2015 (others followed suit – «Words Without Borders» and «Time», for instance). An October 2015 essay by Jedediah Purdy in the «Los Angeles Review of Books» offered a comparative analysis of Te-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and the *Neapolitan Novels*, grounded in their shared resistance to dominant social, cultural, and political narratives. In this way, the novels entered the realm of non-fiction works advocating social justice and political engagement, and caught the attention of public intellectuals and distinguished non-literary scholars such as Mr. Purdy himself. (That Ferrante's texts lend themselves to such treatment is indisputable.) The novels' expanded impact was further endorsed when *Esquire* included the Neapolitan novels among the 80 books every person should read. ⁶ In this list, Ferrante's tetralogy joined mainly English-language masterpieces such as *The Great Gatsby*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Beloved*, and *Middlemarch* and a few translated classics such as *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Elena Ferrante rose to the literary ranks of Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Morrison, Eliot, Tolstoy, and Flaubert.

The canon-formation at work has progressed even further. Ferrante's literary fame is now aligned with that of perhaps the best-known and best-loved woman writer in English, Jane Austen. Elena Ferrante has written the introduction to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* for the Folio Society edition of the novel published in late 2015. The Folio Society editions are themselves works of exquisite craftsmanship as reflected in their price.

5 A. Denhoed, *Ferrante Fever in Brooklyn*, in «The New Yorker», September 2nd, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/ferrante-fever-in-brooklyn> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

6 *80 Books Every Person Should Read*, in «Esquire», January 5, 2016, <http://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/news/g2544/80-books-every-person-should-read/?thumbnails> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

The marriage of Ferrante and Austen manifests the ultimate valorization of the Italian author in the English speaking world. We can now see how the *Neapolitan Novels* have accrued significant value.

Ferrante's introduction to Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was written in Italian and then translated into English by Ann Goldstein – a fact that seems to have escaped notice. Traditionally, introductions to Austen's novels, and to other English-language classics, are written in English by literary scholars. How can we understand this elision? As a reinforcement of the translator's invisibility or rather, as the long-awaited endorsement of translated texts, their complete assimilation? I suspect that the translator's invisibility has enabled Ferrante's introduction of Austen, but also unexpectedly led to the public visibility of translation and the translator's work. The canonization of Ferrante's novels in the United States has not only opened up literature in translation to American readers, it has also effected a shift in the way Americans approach the figure of the translator.

The translator's role has been consecrated with the rise of Elena Ferrante as a literary, cultural, and media phenomenon. Italian Studies scholar Rebecca Falkoff aptly describes the «scandalmongering media obsession» with Ferrante's identity in an essay in «Public Books» from March 2015.⁷ The reading public has likewise been drawn to the Italian author for her visceral insight into women's experience and for her refusal to submit to the demands of the literary market for the author's visible personality. Because the name “Elena Ferrante” is a pseudonym, attention has transferred onto her English translator, Ann Goldstein. Ann Goldstein has become a sought-after speaker, interlocutor, and interviewee; a participant in panels, literary events, and radio broadcasts. She has discussed publicly the *Neapolitan Novels* with literary scholars and famous writers alike. On February 10, 2016, «Asymptote», the leading American journal on literary translation, published an article juxtaposing Elena Ferrante and Pulitzer prize-winning American writer Jhumpa Lahiri who wrote a slim volume in Italian, translated by Ann Goldstein: «The two authors have something in common: they both write in Italian».⁸ And since it would be a stretch to consider Lahiri an Italian writer, we are confronted with the Americanization of Ferrante.

Because Ferrante is not accessible, her absence has been doubly filled: by domesticating her and positioning Goldstein as a suitable replacement for the actual author. Goldstein has been granted authority over the exe-

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7 R. Falkoff, *To Translate Is to Betray: on the Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US*, in «Public Books», March 25, 2015, <http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

8 J. Bonner, *Is Italian Literature Having its Moment?*, in «Asymptote», February 10, 2016, <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/02/10/is-italian-literature-having-its-moment/> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

genesis of the *Neapolitan Novels*, attributed insight into the Ferrante mystery, and even asked if *she* was Elena Ferrante. A September 2015 article in «The Atlantic», dedicated to Elena Ferrante's translator, suggested precisely this substitution.⁹ On January 15, 2016, «Guernica» published an interview with Goldstein conducted by another translator, Katrina Dodson, whose recent translation in English of Clarice Lispector's complete short stories has gained much critical acclaim. Titled *The Face of Ferrante: Katrina Dodson Interviews Ann Goldstein*, the article in effect is enacting and legitimating the perceived equivalence of author and translator, superimposing two names, two faces. A large photograph of Ms. Goldstein opens the interview.¹⁰ A few days later, «The Wall Street Journal» published an article titled *Ann Goldstein: A Star Italian Translator*, also accompanied by (a different) large photograph of the translator's face, and reflecting on Goldstein's popularity:

Translators rarely achieve celebrity status. But as Ms. Ferrante's star has risen, so too has Ms. Goldstein's. Her English translations of the four books in Ms. Ferrante's Neapolitan series have sold more than a million copies in North America, the U.K., Australia and New Zealand. Ms. Goldstein, 66 years old, is now one of the most sought-after translators of Italian literature.¹¹

The substitution, the need for a recognizable face, have not only promoted the work of the translator, they have made it present here and now.

Elena Ferrante's invisibility has enabled the translator's visibility. That is why the *Neapolitan Novels* are valuable not only as literature but also as literature-in-translation. The translator's invisibility, the extent to which the translator must submit to requirements (on behalf of market and reader alike) for readability and accessibility, for fluency and transparency of style, have been much discussed by scholars of translation studies in the past twenty years. Ferrante's novels have, if not reversed, then at least unsettled the paradigm of invisibility, even if perhaps somewhat problematically.¹² I propose there is more to why the duo Elena Ferrante-Ann Gold-

- 9 A. Weiss-Meyer, *The Story of a New Language: Elena Ferrante's American Translator*, in «The Atlantic», September 2, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/the-story-of-a-new-language-elena-ferrante-american-translator/403459/> (accessed on May 3, 2016).
- 10 K. Dodson, *The Face of Ferrante, Katrina Dodson Interviews Ann Goldstein*, in «Guernica», January 15, 2016, <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/the-face-of-ferrante/> (accessed on May 3, 2016).
- 11 J. Maloney, *Ann Goldstein: A Star Italian Translator*, in «The Wall Street Journal», January 20, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/ann-goldstein-a-star-italian-translator-1453310727> (accessed on May 3, 2016).
- 12 Here I duly note a certain tendency for the exoticization, fetishization, and othering of the (female) translator. Also, I am not examining Goldstein's translation in terms of its stylistic features and word choices and therefore, I am not arguing for the kind of abusive fidelity (making the text read and feel like a translation, not concealing its difference) that Venuti associates with the translator's visibility.

stein has increased in cultural value. The female author and female translator team offers a model of creative production and success, oddly replicated within the plot and thematic scope of the *Neapolitan Novels*. Or put conversely, the novels construct a paradigm of feminine collaboration and artistic work, which readers see reduplicated in the coupling of two talented women – Ferrante and Goldstein. We see the originary couple mirrored again in the connections between women translators/authors established through the *Neapolitan Novels*: Katrina Dodson interviews Ann Goldstein; Jhumpa Lahiri shares with Elena Ferrante the Italian language, rendered in English by Goldstein.

This joint, feminine creative momentum lies at the heart of the *Neapolitan Novels*. The novels narrate the complex, all-consuming, decades-long friendship between two strong women – Elena Greco and Lila Cerullo. Friends since childhood, Elena and Lila are each other's rival, confidante, intellectual interlocutor, imagined reader. They are also accomplices in writing literature and creating visual art. The first volume, *My Brilliant Friend*, opens with the sixty-six-year-old Elena who begins to write the story of her friend Lila. Elena has just found out that Lila has disappeared without a trace. She has vanished in thin air, cutting her face from family photographs, erasing every material proof of her existence. This eliminating of all traces, this self-effacement, supplies the formal motivation for Elena's narrative, her ambitious project to tell the story of her friend, to recreate her life textually, to restore and retrace the signs erased by Lila. The prologue of *My Brilliant Friend* is titled «Cancellare le tracce» («Erasing all traces»), thus paradoxically grounding the novels' diegetic existence in disappearance and erasure.

Lila's act of self-erasure constitutes the text's genesis, the rebirth of Lila as narrative. Elena's text can be seen as jointly written by Elena and Lila, as their collaborative project, as the triumph of feminine friendship. By employing the lexicon of effacement, erasure, and invisibility, the opening of the *Neapolitan Novels* also suggests a metaphor for translation. Lila's disappearing act can be read as the translator's self-effacement necessary for the birth of the text in another language. What Elena Greco performs is in a sense translation, a recreation not only of Lila's life but of her words as well. Throughout the novels we see the two learn from each other, collaborate in obvious or opaque ways. As a schoolgirl, Lila writes a novel, *The Blue Fairy* (*La fata blu*), which epitomizes the girls' newly-found passion for literature and displays Lila's creative genius. This is one of Lila's texts haunting Elena's fiction. Later in life, Elena reads Lila's diaries and their language, and the events they recount, suffuse Elena's writing. Finally, as adults, Elena is always wary of Lila's suppressed talent for writing. She fears that Lila will produce the great literary text that Elena, a successful writer and intellectual, is never able to. Rebecca Falkoff rightly points that should

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Lila's literary masterpiece materialize, it would expose Elena's own books as failures, as mere translations of Lila's creative genius into a language foreign to their shared working class Neapolitan neighborhood.¹³

With this in mind, the opening of the tetralogy, its narrative frame, hinges on translation as process and metaphor. Lila's disappearance, her invisibility, is necessary for Elena's text to be born. And if I have argued for the translator's invisibility, and if Elena is "translating" Lila's texts and life into a narrative, then both Lila and Elena are writers and translators, equal collaborators, feminine co-creators, two voices merging into one. In a memorable scene, we observe the two women co-creating, indulging in the shared *jouissance* of artistic invention. In *The Story of a New Name* Lila and Elena transform Lila's wedding photograph into a modernist collage. And they do it together:

They were magnificent hours of play, of invention, of freedom, such as we hadn't experienced together perhaps since childhood. [...] With extreme precision (she was demanding) we attached the black paper cutouts. We traced red or blue borders between the remains of the photograph and the dark clouds that were devouring it. Lila had always been good with lines and colors, but here she did something more, though I wouldn't have been able to say what it was, hour after hour it engulfed me. [...] We forgot about Antonio, Nino, Stefano, the Solaras [...]. We suspended time, we isolated space, there remained only the play of glue, scissors, paper, paint: the play of shared creation.¹⁴

This scene posits women's collaborative artistic work as possible outside the social and symbolic order, outside male-dominated time and space. The image of Lila and Elena as a creative couple annuls the male gaze and exits patriarchal society, at least temporarily. This paradigm of shared invention is repeated in Elena's novel as Lila's and Elena's text. Moreover, the process of reinventing Lila's photograph as an abstract artwork entails both effacement and creation, rendering the photographed body invisible as female body (within a heteronormative order) but visible as art. This recalls Lila's eventual self-erasure which generated Elena's novel in the first place. And again we have the salient vocabulary of the translator's work, the tension between visibility and invisibility, translation as co-creation.

13 Falkoff, *To Translate Is to Betray*, cit.

14 E. Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*, trad. Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, New York 2013, p. 122. In Italian: «Furono ore magnifiche di gioco, di invenzione, di libertà, che non ci capitavano a quel modo, insieme, forse dall'infanzia. [...] Applicammo con estrema precisione (lei era esigente) i ritagli di cartoncino nero. Tracciammo confini rossi o blu tra i resti della foto e le nuvole scure che se la mangiavano. Lei era sempre stata brava con le linee e i colori, ma lì fece qualcosa in più che, anche se non avrei saputo dire cos'era, di ora in ora mi travolse. [...] Ci dimenticammo di Antonio, di Nino, di Stefano, dei Solara [...]. Sospendemmo il tempo, isolammo lo spazio, restò solo il gioco della colla, delle forbici, dei cartoncini, dei colori: il gioco dell'invenzione affiatata» (*Snc*, 121).

The model of feminine creativity appears productive within the diegesis and without. Within, Elena writes her novel and Lila succeeds in disappearing without a trace. In the extradiegetic world, the *Neapolitan Novels* have garnered a significant female following. At the release of the final Neapolitan novel, for example, women readers arrived in pairs at bookstores in New York city to pay homage to the extraordinary friendship between Lila and Elena: «Many of the women present came in pairs», writes «The New Yorker». ¹⁵ As Jedediah Purdy remarks, every reader has «tumbled from Ferrante's pages» onto a formative, all-consuming childhood friendship of their own. ¹⁶ This excursion out of the diegesis and into reality has affected our reception of Ferrante's novels and their translator. We conceive precisely in terms of female pairs the co-creators of the novels and the discourse they have generated about translation, Italian language, female friendship and collaborative work: Ferrante-Goldstein, Lahiri-Ferrante, Lahiri-Goldstein, Goldstein-Dodson. The exchange between novel and reality is valuable because it has brought into focus a contemporary generation of «coppie creatrici» or couples of creative and creating women, to paraphrase Luisa Muraro. ¹⁷

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Last spring, when Ferrante was shortlisted for the prestigious Strega prize, a flurry of articles in the Italian press sought to expose the person behind the pseudonym. The leading rumor suggested that Ferrante is Anita Raja, a respected translator from German who has translated, among other works, East German writer Christa Wolf's novels for edizioni e/o, Ferrante's Italian publisher. This event is significant because it again highlights the labor of the translator in relation to the creative, artistic act, and it again illuminates the work of creative female pairs: Raja-Ferrante and Raja-Wolf. If Elena Ferrante is indeed a translator by profession, then her decision to remain invisible, to efface herself from her texts, makes perfect sense. ¹⁸

¹⁵ Denhoed, *Ferrante Fever in Brooklyn*, cit.

¹⁶ J. Purdy, *Maybe Connect*, in «Los Angeles Review of Books», October 4, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/maybe-connect> (accessed on May 3, 2016).

¹⁷ L. Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori riuniti, Roma 1991, p. 42.

¹⁸ After the completion of this essay in February 2016, Elena Ferrante's *The Story of the Lost Child* was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize and Katrina Dodson won the PEN Translation Prize.