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Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Writing Liminality

When googling “Elena Ferrante” (in the UK), the first page of results provides just a cross-section of the phenomenal success the «global literary sensation that nobody knows», as Meghan O’Rourke labels the elusive author in «The Guardian»,¹ has encountered not only in Italy, but particularly in the Anglo-American world and beyond. Her books have been published in 39 countries. Despite her reluctance to reveal her identity or appear in public, Ferrante has become somewhat of a public figure *in absentia*, being at the center of numerous debates ranging from feminism to contemporary Italian politics. In the Italian media («la Repubblica»), the author has engaged in a debate about literature and the Italian publishing industry with another prominent Neapolitan figure, Roberto Saviano, who has nominated her for the *Premio Strega*, though she has also been the subject of some controversy concerning both her choice to write under a pseudonym – which in itself has generated a fascinating debate on literature and gender – and her allegedly inelegant writing style.²

To name just a few of the recent public accolades, she has been named as one of the top 100 global thinkers of 2014 by the US magazine «Foreign Policy», and magazines and newspapers as diverse as «The Financial Times» and «Vanity Fair» have dedicated long articles and interviews to her, as have prestigious publications including «The New York Times», «The New Yorker», «The Paris Review», «The London Review of Books» and «The Times Literary Supplement». Her most recent publication, *Storia della bambina perduta*, has been eagerly awaited both in the original and in its English translation by Ann Goldstein, and it has been included in the New York Times 10 Best Books of the Year 2015, to mention just one of the many “best reads” the Neapolitan Novels have featured in. In the US, Ferrante publishers have created their own hashtag on Twitter, (#ferrantefever), providing an online platform for enthusiasts to share any news relating to the author, and it has just been announced that the tetralogy will be

1 M. O’Rourke, *Elena Ferrante: the Global Literary Sensation that Nobody Knows*, in «The Guardian», 31 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/31/elena-ferrante-literary-sensation-nobody-knows> (accessed on May 5, 2016).

2 See e.g. the disapproving tone of P. Di Paolo’s article (*Il caso Ferrante. Il romanzo italiano secondo il «New Yorker»*, in «La Stampa», 13 October 2014, <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/10/13/cultura/il-caso-ferrante-il-romanzo-italiano-secondo-il-new-yorker-k6z6crdyRB5A6Z4ycRUrIO/pagina.html>, accessed on May 5, 2016), which derides Ferrante’s success in the United States and ascribes her notoriety not to her books but to her absence: «Ma la forza di Ferrante è, più che nei suoi libri, nel suo non esserci, la sua distanza abissale da tutto».

turned into a 32-episode television series, adapted by the Italian film and television production company Wildside in collaboration with the producer Fandango.³

The attention Ferrante has garnered in both the commercial and of late also in the academic sector⁴ is a remarkable achievement in itself, especially considering the scarce visibility Italian women writers have traditionally been given in international canons of the European novel. With Elsa Morante being not only Ferrante's self-declared chief literary inspiration but also one of the few other women writers from the peninsula to have received international recognition, the newly ignited "Ferrante fever" might also have the beneficial side-effect of drawing attention to some of those post-1960s women authors who have thus far been close to ignored by an international readership and the publishing industry. One such example is Goliarda Sapienza, an author with whom Ferrante shares the autobiographical lens of her narrative and the focus on the (maternal) body. Sapienza is a long-neglected writer whose posthumously published masterpiece *L'arte della gioia*, reissued by Einaudi in 2008 following its success in France, has been released in its English translation in 2013.⁵ The novel has been reviewed in prestigious international newspapers and journals including «The New Yorker» (which was, of course, instrumental to Ferrante's success in the US) and it continues to attract attention from both literary critics and the academic world.⁶

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Leaving the commercial publishing phenomenon to one side, what is it that captures the readers' imagination in Ferrante's works, and to what extent does she, as Joanna Biggs put it in the «London Review of Books», «say something that hasn't been said before»?⁷ The global appeal of her writings certainly seems to speak for a somewhat universal message that

3 See Nick Vivarelli's announcement in the US magazine «Variety» on 9 February 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/italys-wildside-will-produce-tv-series-based-on-elena-ferrantes-the-neapolitan-novels-exclusive-1201700358/> (accessed on May 5, 2016).

4 Interest for Ferrante is also catching up in the academic sector, in particular in the Anglo-American context. The first edited volume on her works in English will be published shortly with Palgrave Macmillan (*The Works of Elena Ferrante: History, Poetics, and Theory*, ed. by G. Russo Bullaro and S. Love, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2016). Other noteworthy recent articles on the author include L. Benedetti, *Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città. L'amica geniale di Elena Ferrante tra continuità e cambiamento*, in «Quaderni d'italianistica», XXXIII, 2, 2012, pp. 171-187, and S. Milkova, *Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante's «La figlia oscura»*, in «Italian Culture», 31, 2, 2013, pp. 91-109.

5 G. Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, eng. trans. by A. Milano Appel, Penguin, London 2013.

6 The first edited volume in English on Sapienza's writings has recently been published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press (*Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, edited by A. Bazzoni, E. Bond and K. Wehling-Giorgi, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, NJ, 2016).

7 J. Biggs, *I was blind, she a falcon*, in «London Review of Books», 37, 17, 10 September 2015, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n17/joanna-biggs/i-was-blind-she-a-falcon> (accessed on May 5, 2016).

issues from the oblique microcosm of the Neapolitan *rioni*.⁸ Not only is there a distinctive sense of «authenticity»⁹ that Ferrante privileges in her fiction, but her texts provide an unadorned account of those forms of existence and experiences which have often been focalised by the male gaze in cultural production. Most prominently, these include female subjectivity, motherhood, and authorship. In fact, Ferrante's texts abound in visual and conceptual metaphors of the violent appropriation and modification of the female body. One of the author's major achievements in my view is precisely her ruthless portrayal of an inherently conflictual process of "decolonization" from the subaltern state that afflicts her female protagonists, who are marginalized not only by their social standing and gender but also by a profound existential preoccupation. With Elena/Lenù engaged in a persistent struggle to write herself out of the «automi di donna fabbricati da maschi» (*Sfr*, 323) that have long defined femininity through the male gaze in literature, the Neapolitan Novels can indeed be productively aligned with Morante's *La Storia* and Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*, both works that similarly renegotiate and resist masculine economies of power.¹⁰

As Ferrante mentioned in a recent interview with «The New York Times», her female protagonists are afflicted by a permanent sense of «oscillation».¹¹ Even when Elena Greco has grown into an educated, successful writer with a confident public appearance, there remains a substratum of otherness, resulting in a propensity to break down and dissolve that persists as one of the central traits of Ferrante's protagonists. This existential oscillation is equally mirrored in a spatial dimension: while Lenù spends her adolescence and early adulthood turning her back on the *rione*, she remains both magnetically drawn to and repelled by this intimate space of alterity. Much of the specular dialectic of the female friendship that lies at the core of the *Neapolitan Novels* is indeed cemented by a profound sense of otherness that spatially fixes Lila to the *rione* whilst Lenù –

8 See also T. de Rogatis's recent article on *Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy. La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano*, in which she argues that Napoli assumes a position of «eccentricity» in the North American imaginary as an «emblema delle diversità italiane» (in *Made in Italy e cultura. Indagine sull'identità italiana contemporanea*, Palumbo, Palermo 2015, pp. 288-317: p. 290).

9 *Women of 2015: Elena Ferrante, Writer. Interview with L. Jobey*, in «Financial Times Magazine», 11 December 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1f019b5c-9d18-11e5-b45d-4812f209f861.html#axzz48ArYDFYV> (accessed on May 5, 2016).

10 In a recent article on Ferrante's tetralogy, Dayna Tortorici draws a comparison between Morante's *La Storia* and Ferrante's tetralogy (*Those Like Us: On Elena Ferrante*, in «n+1», 22, Spring 2015, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-22/reviews/those-like-us/>, accessed on May 5, 2016). On a comparative reading with Goliarda Sapienza, see also K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Ero separata da me»: *Memory, Selfhood and Mother-Tongue in Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante*, in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, cit.

11 E. Ferrante, *Writing has always been a great struggle for me*, interview with R. Donadio, in «The New York Times», 9 December 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/10/books/writing-has-always-been-a-great-struggle-for-me.html?_r=0 (accessed on May 5, 2016).

despite her social ascent – struggles to rid herself of a deeply entrenched notion of subalternity:

Malgrado tutti i miei cambiamenti, seguitavo a esser[e] subalterna. Di quella subalternità sentii che non sarei mai riuscita a liberarmi, e questo mi sembrò insopportabile. (*Sfr*, 204)

Elena's profession as a writer – one of several strategically planted *mise-en-abymes* of the Neapolitan series – is chiefly an attempt not only to give form to but to liberate herself from the oppressive power structures that have dominated her childhood and adolescence. The narrative, which takes shape in her troubled encounter with the past, translates into a diseased cityscape, a wounded urban topography that is further mirrored in the fragmented and violated female bodies that populate the narrative. Indeed, the pervasive metaphors of violence and illness provide productive interpretative keys to the forms of experience negotiated in the tetralogy, as I will further explore below.

In her recent work on contemporary forms of violence and horror, Adriana Cavarero highlights the specific poignancy in the longstanding associations between the femininity and horror. With specific reference to the myth of Medusa, she points out that in our cultural imaginary «l'orrore ha un volto di donna», and it is in this association between horror and the feminine that «aumenta la ripugnanza e l'effetto si potenzia». ¹² The degree of horror associated with the Gorgon is objectified in her bodily dismemberment (in particular the severed head), which acts as an offense to the singularity of the human body and, by inference, of the human subject. At a figurative level, the fragmented body hence amounts to an «ontological» offense that is even further heightened when the woman's reproductive powers come into play, as exemplified in the myth of Medea. ¹³

In her portrayals of motherhood and femininity, Ferrante seizes precisely the disruptive link between the feminine and violence to question and problematize any normative conceptions of female subjectivity. If we take the body to be a «site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions», in the narrative discourse of the tetralogy the female body in fact becomes a powerful locus of «contestation» ¹⁴ that figuratively absorbs many of the protagonists' conflicts. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the latter are metaphorically portrayed in the many forms of physical illness and mutilation that affect the female characters, and the maternal body in particular.

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12 A. Cavarero, *Orrorismo, ovvero della violenza sull'inerte*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007, p. 23 ff.

13 *Ivi*, p. 41.

14 E.A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, pp. 23, 19.

Already in her first “trilogy” of novels (including *L'amore molesto*, *I giorni dell'abbandono* and *La figlia oscura*), which has been cleverly remarketed as *Cronache del mal d'amore*, the confrontation of Ferrante's female protagonists with their leaking, diseased and objectified bodies was at the center of the narrative. In the tetralogy, many of the previous struggles resurface, with domestic and *camorrista* violence still dominating the Neapolitan suburb, whilst pregnancy and motherhood provide unique occasions of conflict in which the body undergoes a series of deformations. In fact, even the existential crises that assail Lila at regular intervals are principally negotiated through the body, with the experience of «smarginatura»¹⁵ providing the conceptual counterpart of corporeal disease and fragmentation.

An emblematic image of physically objectified violence that opens the third volume of the *Neapolitan Novels* is the graphic portrayal of Gigliola's deformed, swollen and desecrated corpse, with her facial features obliterated.¹⁶ The death of Lila and Lenù's childhood friend brings to an end a sad trajectory of the character's emotional and physical abuse perpetrated not only by her ex-husband and *camorrista* Michele Solara, but equally by a sub-culture that is dictated by the ruthless laws of the *rione*. In fact, Gigliola is just one of many women who have fallen victim to this predicament within a society that has remained entrapped in its rigidly patriarchal power structures,¹⁷ a context that Lila and Lenù continue to both operate in and seek to resist.

In a seemingly endless cycle of violence whose perpetrators are often but not exclusively men, it is notable to recall Gigliola's involvement in the vandalisation of the photo panel portraying Stefano Carraci's spouse in her wedding dress that adorns the Solara shop in *Storia del nuovo cognome*, an image which Lila and Lenù had so powerfully manipulated into a collage-style picture of disfigured and fragmented body parts. In a creative process that is in itself reminiscent of the act of writing and the agency that comes with authorship,¹⁸ Lila here realizes «la propria autodistruzione in immagine»,¹⁹ as the narrator notes. The self-mutilated photo stands as one of the novels' central visual metaphors of resistance against the colonization of the female body.

15 «Smarginatura» is a neologism that Ferrante employs to refer to a sense of dissolution that affects her characters. See e.g.: «[come] [se] le persone perdessero i loro margini e dilagassero senza forma» (*Snc*, 355).

16 «Era straordinariamente grassa»; «le caviglie erano diventate enormi»; «viso bello [...] guastato» (*Sfr*, 16). It is later revealed that she died of a heart attack, but the sight of her body gives rise to a series of reflections on women, violence and the *rione*.

17 «Il rione vecchio, a differenza di noi, era rimasto identico», *ibidem*.

18 «Il gioco dell'invenzione affiatata» (*Snc*, 122).

19 *Ibidem*.

The narrator's contemplation of Gigliola's lifeless and desecrated corpse gives rise to a series of reflections on Naples – and in particular the deprived suburb of the *riione* – as a locus of raw violence and hostility whose corporeal constitution seems to mirror the wounds inflicted on the childhood friend's deformed body:

Morti, feriti. E grida, mazzate, bombe carta. Pareva che la città covasse nelle viscere una furia che non riusciva a venir fuori e perciò la erodeva, o erompeva in pustule di superficie, gonfie di veleno contro tutti, bambini, adulti, vecchi, gente di altre città. (*Sfr*, 19)

With its pent-up rage and its liquid poison, the city and its diseased form and structure seem to have seeped into the bodies that inhabit it. In fact, many of the conflicts Lenucia encounters are negotiated through her porous body: «Ebbero l'impressione, nei momenti di maggiore scontento, che i guasti di Napoli si fossero insediati anche nel mio corpo» (*Sbp*, 10). A further locus of transgression and obscenity is constituted by the local dialect, which has similarly absorbed the diseased status of the city and its violently inflected, gendered spaces that cause an irreversible sense of rupture – a breaking down of boundaries that resonates in its language that has been equally contaminated:

Il nostro mondo era così: pieno di parole che ammazzavano: il crup, il tetano, il tifo petecchiale, il gas, la guerra, il tornio, le macerie, il lavoro, il bombardamento, la bomba, la tubercolosi, la suppurazione. (*Ag*, 29)

However, it is in its combination with motherhood that bodily deformation achieves its full force. In fact, mothers and pregnant bodies are mercilessly desecrated by (metaphorical) disease, dislocation, and disgust.²⁰ Pregnancy in itself is experienced as a form of disproportionate swelling and a deformation and the growing fetus as an illness that remains extraneous to the maternal body.²¹ Mothers, on the other hand, are perceived as emanating a permanent sense of threat and disgust. Lenucia makes no secret of the fact that her mother's physicality is a source of repulsion, and Signora Greco's shortcomings find a metaphorical expression in her distorted and deformed body: she has a crossed eye, and her right leg is mutilated. Her limp, which is contrasted with Lila's agility, becomes one of the novel's «central metaphors»²² for the protagonist's detachment from the generation of mute women who have preceded her,²³ an agonizing process that

20 For a fascinating reading of the aesthetics of disgust in *La figlia oscura* see S. Milkova, *Mothers, Daughters, Dolls*, cit.

21 «È una malattia, ho dentro un vuoto che mi pesa» (*Snc*, 109).

22 L. Benedetti, *Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città*, cit., p. 177.

23 See e.g. E. Ferrante, *La figlia oscura*, Rome, Edizioni e/o, 2006, p. 74: «La catena di donne mute o stizzose da cui derivavo».

leaves her with a permanent sense of inadequacy: «fu proprio il pensiero di mia madre, della sua gamba offesa, a farmi sentire costituzionalmente inadatta [...]» (*Snc*, 270). Throughout the novel, however, the ghost of her mother continues to haunt Elena, and when she starts limping herself during her first pregnancy she feels as though «mia madre si fosse insediata nel mio corpo» (*Sfr*, 214). The liberation from the maternal grip proves harder than anticipated, and the sense of otherness that comes with Elena's upbringing remains deeply rooted in her.

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In a society whose forms of experience and spatial topography have long been defined by the masculine gaze, the focus on the deformed and dislocated body is Ferrante's way of expressing her female protagonists' resistance to a deep sense of subalternity. At a conceptual level, this sense of disorientation and indeed dislocation is further reflected in the notion of «smarginatura», an existential state akin to the dissolution of the borders of the self that affects both Lenù and Lila at key stages of their trajectory.

It is this constant oscillation between the rigid power structures the characters operate under, on the one hand, and the steps they take to “decolonize” the feminine experience on the other that creates a productive and unique tension throughout the narrative discourse of the *Neapolitan Novels*. In this context, the body often acts as a «site of contestation»²⁴ that stands in metonymic relationship to the broader conceptual concerns on the notions of motherhood, subjectivity, and language that emerge from the tetralogy. Through the various *mise-en-abymes* and self-referential observations on writing, the four novels give form to what is an essentially feminine gaze on experience. In this dynamic creative process, Lila is life and Elena is form. As the narrator puts it towards the ending of the last novel of the tetralogy, *Storia di una bambina perduta*: «Volevo che [Lila] durasse. Ma volevo essere io a farla durare. Credevo che fosse mio compito» (*Sbp*, 441). Ferrante's focus on the ex-centric space of the *rioni* and the foregrounding of the female gaze not only encapsulate a form of liminality that all too often escapes male-focalised narratives, but her texts issue a powerful form of resistance that renegotiates and reframes history from a feminine point of view.

24 E.A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, cit., p. 19.