La Frantumaglia: Elena Ferrante's "fragmented self"

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Approval Page

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Abstract

La Frantumaglia: Elena Ferrante's "fragmented self"

by

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Adviser: Professor Giancarlo Lombardi

This dissertation consists of the translation of Elena Ferrante's non-fictional work *La Frantumaglia* and a critical analysis of the book. The analysis will present the following sections:

- An introduction to the author and her three novels: *L'Amore Molesto* [*Troubling Love*], *I Giorni dell'Abbandono* [*The Days of Abandonment*] and *La Figlia Oscura* [*The Lost Daughter*];
- An analysis of the importance of *La Frantumaglia* and of the reasons for translating it;
- A discussion of its structure and narrative;
- An exploration of the challenges the work has presented to the translator.

The dissertation will discuss why Elena Ferrante represents a literary case in the Italian contemporary literary scene: she publishes under a pseudonym, she has never appeared in

public and she has never done any promotion for her books, yet she is acclaimed by the public and the critics as one of the most important contemporary women writers in Italy.

The essay will explore the importance of Ferrante's only non-fictional work, *La Frantumaglia,* which, like her novels, reveals a deep focus on fragmented identity, recovery, and reshaping of the self. The book is structured as a multi-layered gradual disclosure of a critical apparatus of the author's fictional works. It can indeed be considered a manual on how to read, interpret, and understand *Troubling Love*, *The Days of Abandonment,* and her latest novel, *The Lost Daughter.*

The organization of *La Frantumaglia* appears to have been planned according to a well thought-out scheme: the letters are not placed randomly but are laid out as a map that the reader must follow before reaching the last chapter, "la frantumaglia," where the most important matters are laid out. The dissertation investigates the narrative contents of these letters and the author's preference of a colloquial style embodied in short, simple and direct utterances. This colloquial nature has made the translation process easier: her language, however, presents obstacles that may blur and complicate this connection and cause linguistic difficulties. These difficulties are discussed is the last section of the dissertation.

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La Frantumaglia: Elena Ferrante's "fragmented self"

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- An introduction to the author and her three novels: *L'Amore Molesto* [*Troubling Love*], *I Giorni dell'Abbandono* [*The Days of Abandonment*] and *La Figlia Oscura* [*The Lost Daughter*];
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The first section will discuss why Elena Ferrante represents a literary case in the Italian contemporary literary scene: she publishes under a pseudonym, she has never appeared in public and she has never done any promotion for her books, yet she is acclaimed by the public and the critics as one of the most important contemporary women writers in Italy. This is also confirmed by the adaptation of her two novels *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment* into two films, in 1995 and 2005 respectively, and their translation into various languages over the years.

The author

In 1992, Elena Ferrante published her first novel, *L'Amore Molesto*, [*Troubling Love]*, which was made into a film in 1995 by the Italian director, Mario Martone. Her first work was subsequently followed by another successful novel in 2002, *I Giorni*

dell'Abbandono [*The Days of Abandonment*], which was also adapted into a film in 2005 by Roberto Faenza. In November 2006 Ferrante published her third fictional work, *La Figlia Oscura* [The *Lost Daughter]*, considered the sequel in the saga that began with her first novels.

Surprisingly, Elena Ferrante has always refused any form of publicity. One reason might be, as she states in *La Frantumaglia,*

> . . . for a slightly neurotic desire to be untouchable. The effort of writing touches every part of the body. When the book is finished, it is as if you had been searched without any respect; you don't want anything else except to recover your integrity, and return to being the person you are every day in your job, your thoughts, your language and your relations. (85)[1]

When asked to do something for the promotion of the first book, she reportedly answered, "I do not intend to do anything for *Troubling Love,*[2] nothing that requires my public exposure. I have already done enough for this long story: I wrote it and if the book is worth something this should be enough" (*La Frantumaglia* 9).

She has not collected the awards received for her writing (the Elsa Morante-Procida Award in 1992 and the Oplonti Award in 1993), and she has always declined to give any interviews on these prestigious recognitions. Her only presence is filtered through her publishing house in the form of letters or brief notes that she sends in response to requests for interviews. Before starting the translation of *La Frantumaglia,* for instance, I asked Ferrante's permission to proceed: the author herself agreed through a note via the publishing house.

The oddness of this process could have a few explanations: as already mentioned, the author wants to remain "untouchable" and only by remaining distant can she preserve

[1] All quotations from *La Frantumaglia* are my translation.
[2] Ferrante's works will be mentioned in their English translation from this point on.

her privacy. This secrecy has fueled several hypotheses about her identity: some critics suggest that behind Ferrante lies another popular Italian writer, Domenico Starnone, or a famous critic, Goffredo Fofi, or even Starnone's wife, Anita Raja, a translator working for Ferrante's publishing house. All these, however, remain mere speculations that bear no contextual support.

In addition to these suggestions, Ferrante's secrecy is seen by some as a profitable and clever move to sell books: in a literary market saturated by many interesting and talented writers who struggle to obtain their own place, the whirlwind around Ferrante generates further curiosity among readers thirsty for gossip. The publication of Ferrante's last book, *The Lost Daughter*, for example, generated another string of possible alternatives, endless speculations that remain, so far, without answers. This has been fueled by the realization that in modern and contemporary Italian literature no writer has so publicly hidden his/her identity, a behavior that was customary in previous centuries when the anonymity was justified for political, social or sexual reasons. However, it is worthwhile to mention that in 1983, Doris Lessing, who was to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, was the protagonist of one of the most successful hoaxes of the century. She published the novel *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* under the pseudonym of Jane Somers, behind which hid a "well-known English woman journalist." The novel did not receive good reviews in America or in Great Britain and only when a year later the sequel appeared, *If the Old Could*, Doris Lessing was revealed to be the author of both works. In the preface to a one-volume edition of both works, the author explained her motives behind the anonymity: "I wanted to illustrate how difficult it is for unknown authors to attract attention. Also, I wanted to play a prank on critics who

insisted on pigeonholing me as one type of writer or another." The author then added that "I wanted to be reviewed on merit, as a new writer; without the benefit of a 'name,' to get free of that cage of associations and labels that every established writer has to learn to live inside." She also confessed that "the reviews were more or less what I expected. It was interesting to be a beginning writer again because I found how patronizing reviewers can be."[3]

The use of a pseudonym appears in this case legitimated by the author's intentions: she wanted to state, in general, how difficult it is for unknown writers to get published and, in particular, how publishers can be influenced by the name on a book as much as by the work itself. Even if her motives were addressed by some critics as a "publicity stunt" and the effort of an author affected by the "success syndrome," they seemed to highlight a new idea of the concept of anonymity which, however, does not seem to match our Italian writer and her motives behind this choice.

In Ferrante's case, in fact, readers are led to believe that this is not a "publicity stunt" or a mere *escamotage* to sell more books: at the same time, they might not well expect to discover the writer's identity through the reading of her works and, consequently, they should resign themselves to that fact that they will possibly never know Ferrante's real identity. At the same time, however, readers acknowledge that no other contemporary writer has been and still is so "visible" in her "invisibility" and so "heavy" in her "lightness," to use some of Italo Calvino's favorite definitions. Perhaps we should accept Ferrante's words when she argues, "to write, knowing that you do not have to be public, generates absolute creative freedom. It is my space that I plan to defend now that I have experienced it. If I were deprived of it, I would feel abruptly

[3] *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, 4

impoverished" (*La Frantumaglia* 63). It is doubtless that readers are less likely to make assumptions about the text based on the author's gender: because of the lack of this knowledge, Ferrante's readers are made to confront the very assumptions that often affect reader's response to a text. In Ferrante's case, readers are simply left to interpret the text in its solitary state. In *La Frantumaglia*, readers are openly invited to dismiss the question of the author's identity: the text determines Ferrante as a woman writer whose themes are traditionally feminine if not feminist.[4]

Ferrante's novels

Ferrante's three novels can be analyzed in their individuality, or better, as I propose in this section, they can be seen as three chapters in a single saga where the female protagonist is an archetypal character who, with different names (Delia-Olga-Leda) and in different environments (Rome-Turin-an unnamed southern Italian town), tries to (re)-create a relationship with herself by connecting with others – her mother, her daughter/s, her husband and even a doll. She appears to be attempting to re-create an identity that externally never seems lost or shattered: in reality, this identity is non existent because her present life, we come to perceive, is only a Pirandellian mask over a void that begs to be filled. The novels witness the filling of this void through a re-fitting of a suitable identity, in a process similar to the making of a dress. In this metaphoric making (a recurrent image in *La Frantumaglia*), the author plays the role of a dressmaker who measures, cuts, fits, and produces the dress/identity through a text that sees different fittings, alternate styles, colors, and shapes, and eventually produces a tailored dress that suits the protagonist perfectly and that -- she hopes -- will please the reader.

[4] For a discussion of these two terms see ed. Giovanna Miceli-Jeffries' *Feminine Feminist*

Her novels, however, do not simply portray ordinary journeys of self-identification and creation: her protagonists are represented in more complicated and difficult struggles. These fights cannot be inscribed into the traditional frame of writing about women and their battle against a patriarchal society in the attempt to gain independence, recognition, and affirmation of their self beyond any "male" intermediary (fathers-lovers-husbands). The discussion presented by Ferrante goes beyond this traditional focus to investigate, in particular, the experience of motherhood, motherliness, and daughterhood. Helen Deutsch's explanations of these terms serve as an important tool to identify these distinct concepts: according to Deutsch, "Motherhood refers to the relationship of the mother to her child as a sociologic, physiologic, and emotional whole. This relationship … extends throughout the further physiologic processes of pregnancy, birth, feeding, and care."[5] With the term motherliness, Deutsch has in mind two main ideas: "**. . .** first, a definite quality of character that stamps the woman's whole personality; second, emotional phenomena that seem to be related to the child's helplessness and need for care."[6] These explanations cast some light on the nature of the term daughterhood that could be explained as the nature of being a daughter and the state of being a/the parent's daughter. Ferrante's novels move exactly from these states, from the relationship between mother-daughter, from the absolute "sociologic, physiologic, emotional" bond between the two individuals. Her novels do not portray, however, mothers and daughters as existing socially in a conventional patriarchal society, thus as identifiable objects only in relation to their men. Mothers and daughters are transformed, in Ferrante's novels, into independent subjects, autonomous figures in complete control

[5] *The Psychology of Women*, 17
[6] Ibid. 17

of their lives, free from any forms of male hegemony: their dis-identification from conventional roles is represented by a new ideology of the maternal, of what it means to be a mother, to be a daughter and by the complex process of identification, affiliation, reciprocity, distanciation, and appropriation between mother and daughter. What is proposed by Ferrante is a new way of reading the complicated relationship between them, a matriarchal lineage that seems to be the backbone of their lives and of any narrative. This is a lineage that has relegated the male figure – father, brother, husband, lover – not simply to a secondary role, but into a passive spectator whose presence occurs only in the space of a page.

Ferrante wants to suggest that mother and daughter replicate each other in an eternal circle that goes beyond any temporal and physical dimension and occurs in a continuous game of distance regarded as independence and closure regarded as dependence. Being mothers-daughters transcends what Simone de Beauvoir defines as "physiological destiny" or "natural calling."[7] According to de Beauvoir, it is in ". . . maternity that woman fulfills her physiological destiny; it is her natural calling, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species."[8] The basis for any female identity, for Ferrante instead, goes beyond this simple "organic" destiny: it is in a unique mother-daughter bond, the only source of identity that, as Nancy Chodorow explains in her clinical analysis of mothering, "lies in a pre-oedipal period; here mother-daughter bonding, not phallic lack, connection, not castration, characterize female

[7] *The Second Sex*, 509
[8] Ibid. 509

identity; here closeness to the mother … defines the process of women's development ...."[9]

The bond that Chodrow emphasizes is based on two considerations:

> … [that] a girl's preoedipal period will be longer than that of a boy and that women , more than men, will be more open to and preoccupied with those very relational issues that go into mothering – feelings of primary identification, lack of separateness or differentiation, ego and body-ego boundary issues and primary love not under the sway of the reality principle. A girl does not simply identify with her mother or want to be like her mother. Rather, mother and daughter maintain elements of their primary relationship which means they feel alike in fundamental ways. Object-relations and conflicts in the oedipal period build upon a preodipal base.[10]

In her novels, Ferrante moves from these findings, from this feeling "alike in fundamental ways," pointing out how, as Chodrow reminds us, "being a woman and mother also means having been the daughter of a mother, which affects the nature of her motherliness and quality of her mothering."[11] Ferrante's works display what Marianne Hirsch would call a "re-definition of maturity as different either from autonomy and separation …. Adult personality, embedded in connectedness, offers a picture of continued mother-daughter entanglement."[12]

This new perspective diverges from a Freudian understanding of the personality development that appears more linked to the individual's break from both parents: according to Ferrante, the unique bond between mother and daughter starts in what Julia Kristeva defines as "the semiotic," the "prosodic language," the mother's milk that is the locus of being, developing and becoming. This "semiotic" concept is recurrent in Ferrante's works, especially, as Jean Suk Oh summarizes, in

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[9] *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 99-100
[10] Ibid. 110
[11] Ibid. 98
[12] *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, 132

> … the physical basis of language, its sounds, tones, and rhythms, originating in the body. The semiotic, as physical, is therefore a psychic modality logically and chronologically prior to the sign: without this bodily basis there could be no symbolic, no language or culture. Therefore, semiotic is a way of communication which is closer to reality and 'truth'…. [S]emiotic is gendered feminine.[13]

The "semiotic" is further discussed by Giancarlo Lombardi who refers to the Kristevan "chora" that is

> … a symbolic and prosodic language made of sounds that does not have any traces in the world of signifiers and signified of the symbolic language, it is the language born in the mother's voice and in the amniotic liquid, recreated once again in that maternal voice, after the birth, through the sweet singing that rocks any baby to sleep, wrapping him in a world that has yet to know any rules, laws or ruptures.[14] (My translation)

It is back to this semiotic, this fluidity and connectedness that we can trace the origin of Ferrante's saga: her archetypal women are portrayed in their becoming and in their creation of a personal realm outside the structures of patriarchal institutions, a space where daughters endlessly continue the process of becoming their own mothers.

In this new portrait of women and family, it seems that Ferrante has re-elaborated one mythical mother-daughter dyad – Demeter and Persephone – that, therefore, could become a useful map for readers to interpret Ferrante's characterizations. The Greek myth could prove to be an important psychoanalytic source to fully comprehend the modern myth, at least as Ferrante has envisioned it: yet it is clear that the ancient myth presents peculiar elements that distance it from the new perspective suggested by Ferrante. In Greek mythology, Demeter, goddess of fertility and the harvest, is characterized by her immense love for her daughter Persephone. The tranquility of their relationship is broken by the disappearance of Persephone, kidnapped by Hades, god of

[13] "A Study of Kristeva and Irigaray's Critiques on Phallogocentrism: An Interdisciplinary Research of Theology and Psychoanalysis," 1
[14]" Scambi d'Identità: Il Recupero del Corpo Materno ne l'Amore Molesto," 288

the underworld who had fallen madly in love with her. The legend says that Demeter's response to her daughter's absence takes different forms: indignation, depression, sorrow, melancholia, mourning, and extreme anger -- especially when she learns that her own husband, Zeus, who is also Hades' brother, might have been party to his daughter's rape. The story of the mother's quest for the daughter eventually ends with a compromise: Persephone is partially restored to Demeter with whom she can spend half of the year, while, during the other half, she returns to her husband as honored Queen of the Dead. When mother and daughter are together, even the earth rejoices and renovates itself as in a new spring of life. As the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" describes their relationship, ". . . so did they then, with hearts as one, greatly cheer each other's soul and spirit with many an embrace: their hearts had relief from their grief while each took and gave back joyousness."[15] What is worthwhile to consider for my analysis, is this focus on the profound, cyclical and mythical connection between mother-daughter that seems to perpetuate itself in Ferrante's novels: as Ellen H. Spitz says, the myth "evokes the bodily identification [mother-daughter] through its cyclical content and its solution, which takes the changing and repeating seasons of the year as a figure for the periodicity of the female reproductive system."[16] As described by Spitz, by offering an archaic and atavistic prototype on how the daughter-mother bond renovates itself continually, the myth helps simplifying and elucidating four main points in Ferrante's novels: first, "the deep bodily identification of mother and daughter, which weaves a cord between them that, though it may at times rip or fray in both pain and anger, can never be completely

[15] "The Homeric Hymn to Demeter,"321
[16] *Mothers and Daughters*: *Ancient and Modern Myths*, 362

broken;"[17] second, "the importance to a woman of becoming, being and remaining a mother;"[18] third, "the wish to process in perpetuity the power conferred by this role, … that encompasses in fantasy both birth and death;"[19] fourth, "the significance of intergenerational gendered bonding, of a matrilineal filiation, which deeply etches itself into the lives of women."[20] And because this myth offers a map to understand and interpret the elaboration of female development as portrayed in Ferrante's novels, it becomes worthwhile, at this point, to explore each novel in its specificity.

Troubling Love

Published in 1992*, Troubling Love* can be read as a psychological mystery novel. The morning of her daughter's birthday, Amalia, mother of the protagonist Delia, is found dead, floating in the Tyrrhenian Sea along the shore of a beach resort near Naples. Delia, who lives in Rome where she works as a comic script artist, decides to return to Naples, her native city, to investigate her mother's death, looking for clues that will explain Amelia's suicide. She will delve into her mother's past, revealing ancient struggles and solving hidden secrets that have marked her own existence and whose solution will finally help her to reconcile with her mother's image and with her own self. By exploring her mother's life, Delia digs deeply into her own, but when she is close to finding the answers she is looking for, she leaves the city, leaving readers pondering what was the actual mystery Delia wanted to solve. *La Frantumaglia* offers unpublished sections of the novel, accompanied by interpretative readings of the protagonists in the sections called "The Clothes, and The Bodies" and "The Monster in The Closet."

[17] Ibid. 368
[18] Ibid. 368
[19] Ibid. 368
[20] Ibid. 368

Furthermore, Ferrante's epistolary exchange with the Italian director Mario Martone before, during, and after the making of his film *Troubling Love*, offers a unique insight into the process of adaptation of this novel.

Ferrante's *Troubling Love* is the story of a quest, not only a quest for reasons that may have pushed Amalia to kill herself, but a psychological quest, through which Delia attempts to rebuild her fragmented self. Delia's quest starts with her mother's half naked body floating in the water, a body that, with relief, she notes "hadn't been assaulted. It showed only some bruises, a result of the waves that, though gentle, had pushed her all night against some rocks at the edge of the water" (*Troubling Love* 14).[21]

It is important to mention that the very first thing Delia tells us about her mother is the absence of any violence on her body, as if she or Ferrante needed to mark, for themselves or for the readers, the ultimate core of their quest. Her mother's body becomes a labyrinth to explore and, at the same time, the very map to the labyrinth: every answer lies on that body, a body that offers clues that will facilitate exiting the maze. The expensive bra, the earrings and rings that her mother was found with, transcend their nature of material objects to become living matter that Delia needs to hold on to, so as not to fall. Using these objects as Ariadne's thread, Delia goes back to Naples, back to the city where everything began and whose memory seems "unstable like a carbonated drink that, if shaken, bubbles up and overflows," (17). The memories of her past will flow, pumping out and overlapping with the present time and, while illuminating mysteries in her own past, they will anticipate the future course of the events. The narration, in fact, follows a dual path: while Delia attempts to reconstruct her mother's last days before the

[21] All the excerpts from *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment* are from the English published versions; those in *The Lost Daughter* are my translation.

suicide, she unconsciously comes to terms with her own past, with those rejected memories that now become the key to interpret her present life and her mother's suicide in a symbolic inextinguishable bond.

Page after page, readers learn of the dramatic events that shaped Delia's life: at five, she was raped by an old pedophile, the grandfather of her very best childhood friend. The violence was experienced by the young girl through denial, alienation and projection, and ultimately led her to hurt her own mother, who had failed to protect her. In Delia's eyes, her mother, her first and main caretaker and her primary source of an identity in progress, failed to perform her fundamental role and from that point on she was unconsciously identified as the reason for Delia's future behavior. The counter-reaction to that violence was a ferocious and psychological war that Delia waged against her mother, a desperate effort not to be like her. In this desperate but vain attempt, Amalia was punished to the point of being falsely accused, by Delia, of having an affair with Caserta, the pedophile's son. Delia, in fact, repeated to her own father those words and gestures that she pretended to have overheard but that, in reality, had been pronounced by her rapist. These words and gestures were passed on to Amalia who, in order not to violate the atavist bond between mother and daughter, made an extreme sacrifice in an ultimate act of love, bearing the shame that led to her self-banishment from her husband's house. From this point on, mother and daughter continued a struggle to survive in a patriarchal world that would otherwise have absolutely annihilated them. Delia and Amalia, divided by too many lies, secrets and unbearable regrets, are held together by a thin thread that is constantly on the verge of breaking. When the mother is found dead on her daughter's birthday, as a last liberating gift from an unsustainable

bond, Delia feels compelled to return to Naples and search for answers. This search will reveal her intimate and unconscious desire to find something that she feels has been taken from her: her return to Naples thus becomes a journey to re-conquest this indefinable element and eventually assimilate this mysterious entity. She realizes that what she has been looking for her entire life is her mother's body, a body that *is* her real self, her only destiny. "A maternal body, a body finally wearable, a body that is dead and yet, maybe for this very reason, now is alive in her, forever acting as the impulse toward future independent growth" (*La Frantumaglia*, 56): all her life, Delia has tried to reject that body, that image, her mother's image, and the image of womanhood. But arriving at the turning point of her life, the modern Persephone, again, acknowledges that only if she reenters her mother's world, taking her role and acquiring her mask, can she re-appropriate her femininity while allowing, at the same time, her mother to remain alive forever.

Therefore, Amalia's make up, her dresses, her hairstyle, become the tools to re-create Delia's new self and erase the woman she is now who, paradoxically, is only a ghost: "You are a ghost," she tells herself looking at her image reflected into the mirror:

> She had the face of a person in her forties; she closed first one eye, then the other, drawing a black pencil over each. She was thin, angular, with prominent cheekbones, the skin miraculously unlined. Her hair was cut very short in order to display as little of its black color as possible, although, to my relief, the black was finally fading to gray and preparing to disappear forever. (42)

The ghost is the old, fake self that, through a process of erasure, is restored to its real essence: the shift from first to third person narration, testifies the real content of Delia's search, the desire to be *like* her mother, *to be* her mother.

To perform this transformation, Delia needs to return to Naples, to go back to the city and the language that embody those identities that she had stripped off her skin when she previously left Naples:

> It was the language of my mother, which I had vainly tried to forget, along with many other things about her. When we saw each other at my house, or I came to Naples for fleeting, half-day visits, she would make an effort to use a stiff Italian, and, in annoyance, just to help her, I would slip into dialect. Not a joyous or nostalgic dialect but unnatural, used inexpertly, pronounced stiltedly, like a barely known foreign language. In the sounds that I uttered uneasily was an echo of the violent quarrels between Amalia and my father, between my father and her relatives, between her and the relatives of my father .... Now that she was dead and I could eliminate it forever, along with the memory that it conveyed, hearing it provoked anxiety. (21)

In all these years she has tried to live a life outside her maternal realm and words: she has always felt uncomfortable expressing herself in dialect, a language that could make her sick, feel dirty, and violated. In this context, as Lombardi argues, this dialect can be seen as

> … the prosodic language that is shared only by a mother and her daughter. The prosodic element seems to be particularly appropriate to the Neapolitan dialect, so rich in musicality and rhythm. However, it is soon clear that this association is impossible: how could that dialect be considered semiotic if, besides being her mother's language, it is also the language spoken during the arguments in Delia's family, the language in which so many arguments have been spoken?[22] (My translation)

But even before this "impossibility" Delia realizes that this is the specific feminine code that links mother and daughter, the language Luce Irigaray defines as "*parler-femme*" (woman-speaking) that originates in the mother's womb and that creates that transformation and development in the future girl; it is a dialect/skin that can not be totally erased since that would bring the erasure of her entire self. Delia needs to

[22]" Scambi d'Identità: Il Recupero del Corpo Materno ne l'Amore Molesto,"289

embrace her past again and, by putting together the pieces of her memory, restore her previous self.

Her journey of restoration becomes, through Ferrante's words, a bodily experience equally felt by Delia and the readers, who become engulfed by the mud of troubling passions, curses, graphic images evoked in the book. It seems that Ferrante needed to transform every sense into a carnal experience since for her the transformation starts first in the meanderings of the body and then of the mind. The Tyrrenean sea is glimpsed as a "purple parchment pasted over a crack in a wall" (55); her mother's apartment bears "the stink of a tired body preserved by clothes that are dirty or made of an old fabric, every fiber saturated with the humors of decades" (28); the city is "encroached on by the steel bodies of cars, and overhung by a scaffolding of yellow-painted iron beams" (56). The clothes that Delia wears, the people whom she meets, become a tiring physical effort for Delia experienced in slow motion, a necessary Herculean test to be passed in order to remain in the game.

In the final pages, readers perceive that Delia's ultimate goal has been reached: she still does not know why Amalia commits suicide but, at that point, this has become an insignificant detail. Amalia is not dead: she is restored into her own daughter. On her way back to Rome, looking at her mother's identity card, Delia finally proclaims this embodiment: "Amalia had been. I was Amalia". This is a conclusion that Ferrante explains in *La Frantumaglia* as

> … the pluperfect tense [that]had to close definitively the unique and unrepeatable life of Amalia. The simple past in English, instead, was meant to reopen it, suggesting a shade of uncanny incompleteness and at the same time, giving a continuation in Delia, who could now consciously take her mother into herself and give her representation.(57)

The novel ends the way it started, on a statement of death and an announcement of a rebirth in the cyclical journey of Persephone's life.

The Days of Abandonment

In the author's own words, her second novel, *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), another tale of abandonment, rejection and restoration, narrates

> … a story of disintegration. Whoever takes love from us destroys the cultural construction we have been building all our life; it deprives us of that sort of Eden which up to that moment had made us seem more innocent and lovable. Human beings give the worst of themselves when their cultural clothes are torn and they find themselves in front of their naked bodies; they feel ashamed by it. In a certain sense the deprivation of love is the common experience closest to the mythic expulsion from Eden; it is the violent ending of the illusion of having a celestial body, it is the discovery of being dispensable and perishable. (*La Frantumaglia* 93)

In this novel, Olga, mother of two, a content and happy wife who leads a rather ordinary life, sees all her certainties collapse when her husband abandons her for a younger woman. While many abandoned women might respond by asserting their female and motherly instincts, Olga gradually regresses into a state of alienation: we need to follow Olga till the end of the book to see how she will gradually manage, "quietly and calmly," to recover the threads of her life and reshape a new identity.

> One April afternoon, right after lunch, my husband announced that he wanted to leave me. He did it while we were clearing the table; the children were quarreling as usual in the next room, the dog was dreaming, growling beside the radiator. He told me that he was confused, that he was having terrible moments of weariness, of dissatisfaction, perhaps of cowardice …. He was composed, as always, apart from an extravagant gesture of his right hand when he explained to me, with a childish frown, that soft voices, a sort of whispering, were urging him elsewhere. (*The Days of Abandonment,* 9)

This is the beginning of the novel, a quiet and a slow incipit that marks the start of Olga's descent into a hell where her husband comes to be depicted as

> … just a man who no longer loves the woman he lives with and struggles with the impossibility of breaking that link without humiliating her, without hurting her. His behaviors are those of a human being who deprives another human being of his love. He knows very well that this action is horrible, but because his need for love has taken other directions, he cannot do anything but act that way. Meanwhile, he takes his time trying to slow down the effects of the wound he has inflicted. Mario is an ordinary person who finds himself faced with the discovery that hurting someone is often painfully inevitable. (*La Frantumaglia* 96)

This ordinary man has pushed Olga into a path that seems to recall Dante's final steps in the *Inferno* when climbing over Lucipher, when the pilgrim does not know if he is climbing upward or actually descending down: he needs to turn around and understand which way is the right one to "*riveder le stelle*," [*see the stars again*]. Accustomed to a quiet life, Olga finds her world suddenly turned upside down as her certainties crumble and her expectations are reduced to pieces. Page after page, we follow Olga in her devastating descent into an existentialist abyss, into the acknowledgement of being "perishable and dispensable," experienced as her life turns into a Greek tragedy. From this point on, Olga's daily gestures are transformed into tragic missteps: the gradual intolerability of her motherhood; the front door of her apartment that remains stuck; the ants crawling all over the house, "in dense multitudes they advanced from the windows, from the balcony, from under the parquet, hurried to hide again, marched toward the kitchen, the sugar, the bread, the jam,"(*The Days of Abandonment* 49); the unfortunate poisoning of the dog and his final death; the landline that is interrupted with its "unbearable hissing"(45); the sickness of her son; the discovery of the missing earrings. In these tragic moments, Olga is alone, tragic figure of a woman who cannot even

rediscover her self in her children's gaze: the rupture with her husband has led her to forget what being a mother and a woman means.

In these overwhelming events Olga proves to be the symbolic woman who fights against what Elena Ferrante calls her own "frantumaglia," a word that becomes a leit motif in the author's works and that she identifies as the marker of an experience lived by every woman. The "frantumaglia" is this unnamable state of "falling into pieces,"

> … an unstable landscape, an air or water mass of infinite wreckage that violently appears to the self as its only true interiority. The *frantumaglia* is the sediment of time without the order of a story, or a tale. The *frantumaglia* is the effect of the sense of loss, when you have the certainty that all that seems stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of ruins that we think we are seeing. The *frantumaglia* is perceiving with great anguish the crowding heterogeneity from which, by living, we take our voice and in which our voice is doomed to disappear. (*La Frantumaglia*, 109)

For Olga, la frantumaglia means also realizing that love with a capital L is only a fictional devise, an illusion, a risky business, a projection of a personal harmony on another human being. This projection led Olga to create a life that Simone de Beauvoir would define as "stable equilibrium in which the present as a continuance of the past avoids the menaces of tomorrow, that is, constructs a life of happiness."[23] But there is a price to pay for this fake existence and in the humid and hot Turin, in the isolation of her big apartment, Olga feels, for the first time, the harshness of this truth. It is in this environment that gradually becomes distant and inhospitable, that the memories of Naples, the city where she was born and that she abandoned to follow her husband, return to punch her in the stomach.

Readers perceive that in Ferrante's novel, Olga's husband's abandonment acts as a catalyst for her return to the past, to that atavistic source where she can eventually

[23] *The Second Sex*, 471

recover. Going back into that city of the past, brings images that have been rejected and denied for some time and that are now too painful to face: in particular, Olga is now haunted by the image of a Neapolitan woman abandoned by the husband and therefore named by others the "poverella." This is a haunting image of a female model always refused by Olga, a figure frequently evoked by her mother during her childhood:

> My mother talked about it with her workers, they cut, sewed, and talked, talked, sewed, and cut, while I played under the table with the pins and the chalk, repeating to myself what I heard, words between sorrow and warning, when you don't know how to keep a man you lose everything, female stories of the end of love, what happens when, overflowing with love, you are no longer loved, and you are left with nothing. The woman lost everything, even her name (perhaps it was Emilia), for everyone she became the "*poverella,*" that poor woman, when we spoke of her that was what we called her. The *poverella* was crying, the *poverella* was screaming, the *poverella* was suffering, torn to pieces by the absence of the sweaty red-haired man, and his perfidious green eyes. (*Days of Abandonment*16)

This image becomes a shadow that torments her as she experiences her personal downfall:

> Maybe I had beside me, stiff as a sepulchral statue, the abandoned woman of my childhood memories, the *poverella*. She had come from Naples to Turin to grab me by the hem of my skirt, before I flew down from the fifth floor. She knew that I wanted to pour out on my husband tears of cold sweat and blood, and cry to him: stay. I recalled that she, the *poverella*, had done that. (44)

Olga does not want to resemble that Neapolitan woman yet she feels drawn to the same abyss that claimed her existence. She feels her mother's disappointment for her failure: she feels the finger pointed at her, she is the reason why Mario has abandoned her, she should have prevented it, done the impossible to stop him. But she has failed and she is now a *poverella*, a miserable woman "torn to pieces by the absence of the sweaty red-haired man."

The necessity to find a way out of her labyrinth pushes Olga to ponder upon different alternatives and eventually decide to revisit her past and face its ghosts again. It is at this point that Ferrante shifts the narration from first to third person: such distance creates a boundary, trying to turn chaos into order and fostering a healing process. But this respite does not last long: shortly thereafter, Olga plunges back into the heaviness of her present condition. Olga needs another thread, another map, and in the reverse direction to that taken by Delia in *Troubling Love*, but to the same effect, she will get to the turning point through the same overlapping projection of bodies and images between mother and daughter:

> Without realizing it, I had been transformed into one of them, a figure of childish fantasies, and now Ilaria was only returning to me my true image, she had tried to resemble me by making herself up like me. This was the reality that I was about to discover, behind the appearance of so many years. I was already no longer I, I was someone else, as I had feared since waking up, as I had feared since who knows when. Now any resistance was useless, I was lost just as I was laboring with all my strength not to lose myself, I was no longer there, at the entrance to my house, in front of the reinforced door, coming to grips with that disobedient key. I was only pretending to be there, as in a child's game. (121)

The restoration can take place only when it passes through the mother-daughter bond. Olga needs to come to terms with motherhood through the process of projection and association with her own daughter, and only through this process, can she feel alive again and face the world through the prospective of her new self.

Olga's recovery is a long and exhausting process described by Ferrante in a language that is violent and tortuous in parts, revealing human pain before the loss of reason, possession, and soul: in *La Frantumaglia,* Ferrante argues that

> … in talking about Olga's sexuality and what I do know about sexuality, I wanted at least three things to be assumed, all of them critically inspired by those passages: first, for women, any love relationship, matrimonial or

> not, is based not *only for bad but also for good* on the reactivation of their primitive relationship with their mother. Second, the marriage – first, second or third, heterosexual or homosexual – can not erase from the female life the troubling love for the mother figure, the only love-hate that lasts for ever. The third is that what prevents Olga by betraying Mario is that Mario, since the beginning, has unconsciously become for her the fantasies connected to her mother, and this is what will make the abandonment so devastating.(148)

Only when Olga reconnects with her mother's image and with motherhood in general, can she become a woman again, and thus rejoin the struggles quietly experienced by other women. Only at this point can she reconnect with her own femininity and sexuality and learn how to speak the language of love again. In the last lines of the novel, the encounter with the other man shows how Olga, the new woman and mother, has regained full control of her new self:

> What happened to you that night? I had an excessive reaction that pierced the surface of things. And then? I fell. And where did you end up? Nowhere. There was no depth, there was no precipice. There was nothing. He embraced me, he held me close to him for a while, without saying a word. He was trying to communicate silently that, through his mysterious gift, he knew how to make meaning stronger, to invent a feeling of fullness and joy. I pretended to believe him and so we loved each other for a long time, in the days and months to come, quietly. (*Days of Abandonment* 188)

Olga can go back to life now, with another man and another self with which she can cohabit. The novel does show how women

> … are always more forced by events to face difficult ordeals to restructure our private life and to be admitted into public life. It's not a choice; it is not the effect of a mutation: it's a necessity. To avoid these ordeals would mean to be swallowed up again by subalternity, to give up ourselves and our specificity, to be absorbed again by the universal Man. (*La Frantumaglia*, 97)

The necessity to come back to life is not due to her family, and friends but to a sense of womanhood, of being the "universal" woman-mother-daughter.

The Lost Daughter

Ferrante's third novel, *The Lost Daughter*, published in 2006, narrates a story that can be considered the continuation of the other two novels and, as such, an extended field where the author plays out and expands her views.

"Sono morta ma sto bene" [I am dead but I am fine]: these are the words with which Elena Ferrante concludes her trilogy dedicated to a woman's story. The plot is very simple: Leda, a 48 year-old professor of English at the University of Florence decides to go on holiday in southern Italy, where she rents a small apartment. She is alone because her two daughters have gone to visit her former husband who now lives in Canada. On the beach, she meets a Neapolitan family, "heavy men with pale faces, women of evil richness and obese children," (*The Lost Daughter* 21) labeled by the life guard as "evil people." Leda's attention, however, is immediately captivated by Nina and her daughter Elena, a girl who always carries a dirty, broken doll. Nina and Elena appear as the peaceful oasis in the noisy world of the relatives and friends that constantly surrounds them:

> They also belonged to a big noisy family but she, the young mother, seen in the distance with her skinny body, the fine one piece-swimsuit, the very feeble neck, the nice shape of her head with the long and wavy black hair, the Indian-like face, the strong cheekbones, the heavy eyebrows and the oblique eyes, seemed an anomaly inside the group, an organism miraculously escaped from the rule, the addicted victim of a kidnapping or of an exchange at birth. (14-15)

While in Ferrante's other novels we have assisted to dramatic events devised by the author to stop the sequence of the protagonists' ordinary lives and plunge them immediately into the drama, in this case the author tries something else: she lets the protagonist create her own destiny and plunge into alienation and self destruction. Leda is solely responsible for her descent into "frantumaglia," into that anguishing state where present and past overlap and where she is obliged to reinterpret her present existence.

On a beautiful sunny beach, Leda could fully enjoy her newly found freedom, since her two daughters are likely to remain in Canada with their father. Leda could keep walking along the path where full self-realization began, years earlier, when she left Naples to go to Florence in pursuit of her academic career. She could thrive on her previous ability to leave her husband and daughters behind for "three years and thirty-six days" when she left home to embark on a different life. She could continue to spend idle hours on the beach preparing her course on Virginia Woolf. Thus, she could keep up appearances on that sunny Italian beach: instead, she allows herself to be pulled into the whirlwind revolving around the lives of Nina and Elena, whose actions will ignite the beginning of a new course in Leda's life.

Since the beginning, Leda feels obsessively driven by Nina and Elena's daily gestures, by their beauty, and their words spoken "with a nice vernacular flavor, the Neapolitan that I love, the tender dialect of games and caresses. I was enchanted" (16-17). This obsessive attraction, "a light pang that becomes more unbearable the more you think about it" (19), appears to the readers as something more primitive, a mixture of love and envy, a profound affinity between the two women. It is because of this affinity that Leda starts questioning her role as a woman and as a mother, roles she has rejected since

she was little, in open contrast with her own mother. At this point again, Ferrante shows how readers have reached the heart of the matter: the problematic relationship between mother and daughter, spoken through the unique language, defined by Lombardi as "the prosodic element shared since pregnancy," and then it "is put aside when the daughter officially becomes a member of a community, when she acquires the use of the symbolic language, the patriarchal instrument that links and defines her in terms that are not hers …." [24] The Kristeva's "semiotic," Lombardi reminds us, "keeps lying inside her and surfaces in different moments, similar to the episodes of involuntary memory described by Proust in its *Recherche*."[25]

Leda's encounter with Nina and Elena is the engine that prompts these "involuntary memories" buried underneath which will emerge through the broken layers of the present: these memories will jeopardize her current life, and will lead her to question her identity as a woman and a mother. The mother-daughter bond represented by Nina-Elena is the projection of that very bond Leda has rejected and longed for her entire life: it mirrors the unconscious desire to be like her own mother but also, at the same time, its very opposite. It is the desire to recreate herself in the mother's image but, also to create something beyond that:

> I wanted to be like her not only in the image of the mirror or the stillness in pictures. I wanted to be like her for her ability to expand and evaporate down the streets, in the subway or in the funicular, in the shops, under strangers' eyes. No instrument of reproduction knows how to capture that enchanted foam. Not even a pregnant belly knows how to do it with precision. (55)

Leda recurrently witnesses Nina's protective attitude toward her daughter, how she pampers and shields her from the claustrophobic and brutal environment of their

[24] "Scambi d'Identità: il Recupero del Corpo Materno ne l'Amore Molesto,"288
[25] Ibid. 288

relatives, distancing, at the same time, the child from the verbal abuses daily perpetrated through dialect. Nina's attitude, together with the care mother and daughter demonstrate for the doll, will alert Leda back to the primitive state of motherhood, rediscovering the magic of creation, nurture and motherhood.

> I put the doll on my lap to provide me with some company. Why did I take it? It had Nina and Elena's love, their connection, their reciprocal passion. It was the shining witness of a content motherhood. I put it on my breast. What a waste, all these lost things I had once and now they were present before my eyes in a vortex of images. I clearly felt that I did not want to return Nani even if I felt the remorse and the fear in keeping it with me. I kissed it on its face, on its mouth; I held it tightly as I had seen Elena doing it. (59)

Just as Demeter "kidnapped" another child to "replace" her missing daughter, Leda steals Elena's doll that thus stands for something she has never truly experienced. This dirty object she cleans and baby-sits becomes the "other" through which she can reorder her own "frantumaglia." But the doll does not belong to her and when Nina discovers it, she attacks Leda with a hair pin causing the small wound on which the novel opens.

At the end of the novel, readers realize that the story tells the tale of a failure, a failure of a woman who believes to be emancipated from the mother daughter bond, from her own mother, from the burning memory of Naples and its "*napoletaneità.*" She has tried to escape from it "as a burned person who, crying desperately, tries to peel off the burned skin, hoping to peel the burn itself," but she eventually realizes that the only escape is to surrender to this state and to make it her own.

Moving from *La Frantumaglia*, the theoretical laboratory where Ferrante elaborates her views on womanhood, *The Lost Daughter* displays the symbolic process no woman can escape: Lenuccia, Nina, Leda, Nani (little girl, mother, protagonist and doll) reassembling phonetically the jargon of affection, are multiple names of the same

person, images of the universal mother-daughter bond that cyclically repeats itself. “Sono morta ma sto bene”: Leda’s final words mark, as in the other novels, the announcement of a death through which readers perceive the shadow of a future rebirth.

The importance of *La Frantumaglia*

The second section of my essay will explore the importance of Ferrante's only non-fictional work, *La Frantumaglia,* which, like her novels, reveals a deep focus on fragmented identity, recovery, and reshaping of the self. The book is structured as a multi-layered gradual disclosure of a critical apparatus of the author's fictional works. It can indeed be considered a manual on how to read, interpret, and understand *Troubling Love*, *The Days of Abandonment,* and her latest novel, *The Lost Daughter.*

La Frantumaglia [a Neapolitan word that could be roughly translated as "the act and the state of 'falling into pieces'"] is a collection of letters written by and to the author, produced over the decade that begins with the appearance of *Troubling Love* and concluded shortly before the appearance of the film based on *The Days of Abandonment* (1991-2003). As stated on the first page of the book, these letters must clarify the reasons why Elena Ferrante has decided to distance herself from "the logic and the necessity of media" (*La Frantumaglia,* 5*).* This explicit declaration of independence and privacy adds to the real role of the book and to the importance of its translation: in the absence of any information about the author, it represents the only collection to date of the writer's personal interpretations, thoughts, and opinions on various topics. It serves as a discussion of the author's themes and protagonists of her novels, but it also reveals Ferrante's position on Italian politics, on therapy, on writing, and on generic subjects such as love, betrayal, feminism, and the relationships between women and men and among women. In short, it stands for the author.

In *La Frantumaglia*, readers confront the prominence of the confessional nature of these letters, which testify to Ferrante's urge to clarify and justify characterizations and

styles adopted in her novels. This nature seems to conform to several critical discussions on the genre: in *Anatomy of Criticism,* Northrop Frye maintains that a confessional work is "introverted and intellectualized in content" and there is "always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art … and the author of a confession feels that his life is worth writing about."[26] Along this line, Francis Hart writes that a confession is "a personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth of the self."[27] Like feminist consciousness-raising, the confessional text makes public that which has been private, "typically claiming," as Rita Felski adds, "to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience."[28]

More than Ferrante's previous novels, *La Frantumaglia* seems to conform to the previous descriptions for its confessional nature allows the author to reveal herself to her readers. Through this confessional work, Ferrante demonstrates what Frye calls the proof that an author's "life is worth writing about": her writing can thus be perceived what Felski sees as an "indispensable feature of a process of critical self understanding which constitutes part of a feminism's emancipatory project"[29] in which Ferrante seems to participate. In *La Frantumaglia*, this process of self understanding and revelation is often emphasized by the inclusion of passages that were originally excised from her published works, but that are now felt as necessary "supplement" for a fuller understanding of the thesis she is putting forth in her letters.

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[26] *Anatomy of Criticism* ,308
[27] *Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography*, 491
[28] "On Confession,"83
[29] Ibid. 84

Nevertheless, even though the book presents elements common to the canonical autobiography, its confessional nature does not explicitly make *La Frantumaglia* an autobiography: this modern confessional work distinguishes itself from such texts which traditionally bear a pedagogical, theoretical and intellectual interest in sharing life events with the reader. In Ferrante, in fact, we feel that the autobiographical data are present only as support for a critical analysis of her own writing: in this analysis, author and critic become one, since it is Ferrante herself who provides the key to the truth hidden under the multilayered surface of her language. For this reason, to understand better the role of her "confession" and the way it differs from its wider genre, it seems necessary to trace a brief development of this category of texts and to investigate the differences between the canonical works and Ferrante's text.

Over the years, the confession has shifted from religious and spiritual journey of redemption to a modern form of self-analysis which explores the intimate, emotional and subjective aspects of the self. In this modern form, the confession is the representation of the desire to express oneself freely, shedding fear and constraints previously experienced at the hands of a judgmental society. Along these lines, it is worth remembering those coming-out narratives as well as more intimate and less political recounting of psychical and emotional loss. These works have thus rejoined others about disease and abandonment that generally narrate a journey which has been likened, to paraphrase the title of a famous novel by Doris Lessing, to a "descent into hell." In all these works, there is a clear pursuit of authenticity through a selection of those episodes in the author's life that better express his or her inner thoughts, dreams, expectations, and disillusionments. Sometimes, an autobiography can become the author's defense for

his/her controversial choice in life: an example could be *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* where the author revisits the events that led him to abandon the Nation of Islam. Thus, while it is apparent that these confessional works are the manifestations of a unique personality or a personal journey, they are also meant as an example by encouraging a community of readers to mirror their experiences and to find inspiration or solace in the life narratives.

Female autobiographies take this category, as previously described, one step forward: even when it narrates unusual episodes or unique lives, the feminist confession seems to pay particular attention to the ordinary events experienced by women, to those typical fragments of the life of an average woman bearing no specific intent of claiming any universal significance or exemplarity. It seems that the author's intent is to capture the specificities of a single moment, a single memory or different traces from the past and to cast a self-interpretation in a sort of idealized way for her and for her readers. For these women writers, the autobiography ultimately becomes what Sidonie Smith argues, "both the process and the product of assigning meanings to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omissions."[30] The authenticity and the representativeness of these experiences, instead of giving theoretical abstractions about life in general, depict authentic problems, contradictions, hopes, and anxieties of everyday life: as Rita Felski states "feminist confession selects out those aspects of experience which are perceived to possess a representative significance in relation to the audience of women it wishes to reach."[31] At a higher level, she sees the feminist confession as instrumental in the

[30] *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 45
[31] *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader,* 85

> … delineation of a group identity through the establishment of norms; it formulates elements of a more general feminist critique, and concretizes aspects of the aims and interests of the women's movement: the lyrical self articulated in these texts always perceived itself as part of a collective, whose experiences constitute its norms and on behalf of whose members it speaks. [32]

Focused on their project of, as Nancy Miller notes, "sincere truth telling, a promise to the reader that the textual and referential "I" are one,"[33] female autobiographers know that, as Miller adds, "they are read as women,"[34] and this perception will push them to approach the readers as if they were the only listeners, the only arbiter to their story. They will speak directly to the reader about their process of constructing and de-constructing their self and they will always be extremely and acutely sensitive, as Smith argues "to their readers' expectations and to their conflicting desires, negotiating a sometimes elegant, sometimes cramped balance of anticipated reader expectations and responsive authorial maneuvers."[35] By revealing their consciousness to the readers, female autobiographers put the narrative onto another level positioning themselves as women writing in what Smith defines "androcentric genre … they are absorbed in a dialogue with the reader through whom they are working to identify themselves and to justify their decision to write about themselves in a genre that is man's."[36] As "androcentric genre," the female autobiography will indicate the authorial role of the writer, who, choosing to tell her story and to tell it so that the audience can read and listen to it, will focus on the description of what Smith indicates as "progressive stages in which the author suggests how she has become who she is: the childhood that moved her toward some vocation, her educational

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[32] Ibid. 85
[33] "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," 47
[34] Ibid 49
[35] *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography,*50
[36] Ibid. 50

and intellectual experiences … her reflection on her achievements in later years."[37] In so doing, the autobiographer claims her legitimate status as an autonomous individual who "most fully realizes her unique potentiality,"[38] but needs the other (the reader) to effectively construct it. By doing this, the autobiographer seems to illustrate Mary G. Mason's words: "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some other."[39]

In light of these remarks, female confessional works can be categorized in two main groups: in the first one, the author generally sketches out thoughts and notes in a very open-ended structure where she reveals everyday moments and feelings in her life. The narration, often in the present tense, takes mainly the form of a diary, since its intimate and tentative nature, as Rita Felski notes, "regulates the potential open-endedness of the literary text."[40] The preference for a diary is also due to the fact that, as Felski further explains,

> … the more obviously "literary" the text – the more clearly it signals its fictional status through such textual features as irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, extended use of symbolic and "poetic" language, or elaborated narrative structures – the less likely the reader is to respond to the text as the authentic self-expression of an authorial subject.[41]

The diary, as vehicle of "authentic self-expression," was, for example, considered by Virginia Woolf as a sort of living presence, a necessary exercise for her mind, the place where she could pour all her theoretical and practical questions about life and writing:

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[37] Ibid. 52
[38] Ibid. 52
[39] "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," 210
[40] "On Confession," 86
[41] Ibid. 86

> There looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into mind … I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art.[42]

The diary becomes for Woolf the place where she can refine and "coalesce" her thoughts and the place to give authority and autonomy to a self.

Following Rita Felski's classification of confessional works, the second form of confessional text uses a structure based on "retrospective narration and is less obviously concerned with inclusiveness and the depiction of every detail of daily events."[43] The author appears more focused in describing those episodes in her life that have caused a major impact and important developments in her life: the death of a lover, the abandonment of a spouse, the loss of a parent or a relative, the disease of a family member, the first sexual encounter, the experience of motherhood. The narration of these episodes fosters a long discussion on individual and universal values about family, life, love, death, hate, sex. Along these lines, readers have encountered, for example, the day-by-day recounting of a parent's death in Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*. In this book, the reader feels immediate sympathy and connection with the author and the woman behind those lines. "My real life took place at her side,"[44] de Beauvoir writes while remembering her mother's slow descent toward death:

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[42] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977
[43] "On Confession,"86
[44] *A Very Easy Death*, 73

> I had understood all my sorrows up until that night: even when they flowed over my head I recognized myself in them … I had put Maman's mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements. Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there, and compassion wrung my heart. [45]

Simone de Beauvoir's identification with her mother occurs in front of her audience, fostering the creation of a community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated general public. As Felski notes, this sense of

> … communality is accentuated through a tone of intimacy, shared allusions, and unexplained references with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. The implied reader of the feminist confession is the sympathetic female confidante and is often explicitly encoded in the text through appeals, questions, and direct addresses. The importance of the reader's role is directly related to the belief that she will understand and share the author's position.[46]

Similarly, Annie Ernaux seeks to tell her personal stories in several texts such as *Une Femme* [*A Woman's Story*], *La Place* [*A Man's Place*], *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* [*I Remain in Darkness*], and *La Honte* [*Shame*], where she repeatedly recounts the lives of her parents in order to communicate her own past and to discover her own future in their past. Her intimate discourses to and about her parents manifest Ernaux's desire to articulate what E. Nicole Meyer indicates as "her own narrative psychic space," a space where she can "speak both to others and to herself."[47] As Ernaux states in *A Woman's Story,* her project of self revelation reveals the importance of the Other, of her mother, and of her writing:

> The more objective aspect of my writing will probably involve a cross between family history and sociology, reality and fiction. This book can be seen as a literary venture as its purpose is to find out the truth about my mother, a truth that can be conveyed only by words. [48]

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[45] Ibid. 31
[46] "On Confession," 86
[47] Voicing Childhood: Remembering the Mother in Annie Ernaux's Autobiographies,33
[48] *A Woman's Story*, 12

In this book, for example, Ernaux revisits and relives the agony of her mother's degradation into Alzheimer's-induced dementia and her narrative becomes an attempt to give back a voice to her mother, to frantically reverse her slow descent:

> I spend a lot of time reflecting on what I have to say and on the choice and sequence of words, as if there existed only one immutable order which would convey the truth about my mother (although what this truth involves I am unable to say.) When I am writing, the only thing that matters to me is to find that particular order. [49]

These excerpts of female confession could be easily juxtaposed to passages from a number of fictional and non fictional confessional texts, such as Alba de Céspedes' *Quaderno Proibito[Forbidden Papers]*, Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico Famigliare[Family Language]*, Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, Dacia Maraini's *A Memoria [Memory]*, Simone de Beauvoir's *La Femme Rompue[The Broken Woman]*, Orianna Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato[A letter to an unborn child]*.[50] They mirror the strong intent to interact closely with the female audience, and, to capture what Lombardi calls "their own perception of reality." In his critical study of diarist fiction, he identifies the recurrent presence of mirrors and windows as symbols of the confessional genre:

> The mirror and the window are there to remind them, that, in their writings, two different discourses will be interwoven. Mirrors of their souls, their diaries will bear witness to their internal struggles while reflecting, at the same time, (on) the external world, whose sociopolitical turmoil will be observed, however, from afar. Constantly excluded from history, women have been forced to act as mere spectators to events which have nevertheless shaped their subjugated condition: the window thus remains their assigned place, and it is a window which contains prison bars, if only at a symbolic level.[51]

La Frantumaglia, as a confession, seems to conform to both types of modern female confessions discussed, especially for its sense of urgency and excitement with which the

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[49] Ibid. 31-32
[50] The English titles of the cited works are my translation.
[51] *Rooms with a View*, 15-6

author communicates her thoughts and her truths about her unique self. Through the narrative strategy of her letters, Ferrante reveals present fragments of her own life, but also images of her childhood in Naples, of her mother, and her sisters, in addition to an exploration of her personal feelings about male and female culture. Like to other female autobiographers, by revealing images of her unique self, attempting, at the same time, to state herself as female subject, Ferrante challenges the reader with a vast selection of myths, tropes, metaphors, rhetorical figures that as Sidone Smith emphasizes, "are always cast in language and are motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing her at the scene of writing."[52] The centrality of Ferrante's mother in her narrative reminds us of Ernaux's texts, or Adrienne Rich's investigation on motherhood as an experience and as an institution. The image of her mother, a topic that will be further discussed in section three of the present essay, reflects the journey of a daughter who has fought all her life to be different from her parent but eventually, as Adrienne Rich summarizes "has time after time and in different ways tried to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her."[53] However, despite these elements in common with other female confessions, Ferrante's work seems to go a step forward: she singles herself out of a certain canon of autobiographers for her main emphasis on the process of representation, on a writing that displays a critical analysis of her own views and characters. The fragments, these disconnected snapshots, become only a pretext to attract the readers toward familiar grounds to later lead them towards the real targets of her prose: *La Frantumaglia* manifests, in fact, a "long, exhausting, pleasant seduction" with writing. What poses and presents as an autobiographical work is

[52] *A Poetic's of Women's Autobiography*,47
[53] *Of Woman Born*, 218

revealed to be a critical analysis of her own style, and her work, thus becoming what Marcel Proust called, in reference to his own writing, a "magnifying glass … so that through my book I would give them[the readers] the means of reading in [my]self."[54]

La Frantumaglia thus acts as the magnifying glass; it is the mirror and the window on Ferrante's views not on her "internal struggles and the external world," but rather on the acknowledgement of handling a craft, a *mestiere,* that requires care and attention. Ferrante presents herself as an artisan who needs to reinvent her own space/text so that she can populate it with images, thoughts, and people of her past and her present in order to rethink them and, in a certain way, to repossess them. However, the craft of writing is not only a means of organizing or finding words, which is an easy task for Ferrante, "Words carry along other words; it's always possible to write a page of banal, elegant, heartfelt and entertaining coherence on any topic" (20). Her *mestiere* is the ability of sewing a "text," of witnessing it becoming to life and its emancipation:

> In my experience, the pleasure-pain of writing touches every part of the body. When the book is finished, you feel like you have been searched with excessive intimacy and you wish for nothing other than regaining distance and returning to original completeness. I have discovered, publishing, that a certain relief comes from the fact that the text, once it is printed, goes elsewhere. (60)

It is in this "total" act of telling that Ferrante lets readers plunge into the actuality of her descriptions, in a writing where she may have doubled herself, and may have made of herself another: Andrea Battistini points out that "typical of an autobiographical work is the anomalous coincidence of author, narrator and character."[55] In Adriana Cavarero's words, there is in confessional works, the pretense

[54] *The Past Recaptured*,1113
[55] *Lo Specchio di Dedalo*, 129

> … that a self that makes himself an other in order to be able to tell his own story; or rather, of a self which, using his memory is a separated mirror in which he inseparably exists, appears to himself as an other. The other, therefore, is the fantastic product of a doubling, the supplement of an absence, the parody of a relation.[56]

In her confessional exercise, the other, the real addressees are the ideal readers to which she appeals and without which she would not exist: it is clear, as Derrida would argue that "the one who signs tells his own life-story … but because he tells *himself* this life-story, he is the first, if not the only, *addressee* of the narration,"[57] yet readers are the necessary complement to this effort. This doubling of the self must be seen, however, as another technique to assess the role of her work, to critically analyze her writing and illuminate its contents.

In sum, in the general picture and interpretation of the confessional genre, Ferrante breaks free from the traditional frame of narrative in order to center her exploration on a critical exposure of her narratorial style and characterizations. The exploration of emotional states that she performs in *La Frantumaglia*, through a personal confessional note, must be considered an essential element for the critical analysis but it serves also in creating a sense of identification, of interdependence, of a community of "female" readers who can see themselves projected and represented in Ferrante's stories.

In this way, the author's representations do not appear only individualistic, but also collective: scholars such as Georges Gusdorf and feminist theorists like Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow have argued that the concept of confessional work is premised on a well-felt model of the self, of an individual who "does not feel *herself* outside of others, and still less *against* others, but very much *with* others in an

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[56] *Relating Narratives*, 84
[57] *The Ear of the Other*, 57

interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community."[58] This sense of identification, interdependence and community marks the formation of what Rowbotham defines as "woman's consciousness" within the larger community of human beings.[59]

In this performative act of self narration through fragments, her written page becomes the location where the self-fragmentation is restored to unity and a mirror returns an image that it is exceptional and ordinary at the same time. For this reason her text can be read on two levels, the literal one and the symbolic one, as it transcends the singular truth to reach a higher value and perspective. The literal level is addressed and performed for the female public in general and it is the level that places Ferrante in the common context of autobiographers and women's writing.

The symbolic value of her work testifies the *locus amoenus* that belongs only to the author and the place where Ferrante can practice her own version of sewing, art she has inherited from her own mother. The threads, the fabric, the stitches her mother used to work every day are transformed into a writing technique, into a form of conceiving art: words must be cut, colored, shaped, fitted to suit the memory of the past and the present.

> The story takes off, the pieces that are already written acquire energy and suddenly find the way to join together; then writing becomes a pleasure, the hours are a time of intense jouissance. The characters don't leave you anymore, they have their time-space in which they are alive, are more and more clear; they are inside and outside of you, they are firmly in the roads, in the houses, in the places where the event must take shape. (76)

Once the text-dress is finished, the author-dressmaker can let it go its own way and she can return to plan and design the next one.

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[58] "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,"49
[59] *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, 103

Narrative Contents

Upon close analysis, the organization of *La Frantumaglia* appears to have been planned according to a well thought-out scheme: the letters are not placed randomly but are laid out as a map that the reader must follow before reaching the last chapter, "la frantumaglia," where the most important matters are laid out. In each letter, the reader is virtually instructed on how to get to the following one and acquire the appropriate expertise to proceed: along this journey, at each 'stop' the reader encounters narrative materials that are self-sustained, but which can be added to and enriched by the letter that follows. In this slow process, the letters gradually construct a larger picture of the artist as Ferrante plays the dressmaker who "cuts a dress on herself" just as she performs a virtual striptease, revealing those parts that better fit her identity until we get to the last chapter where the last and most important truths are finally revealed.

Her journey covers a group of fundamental topics: the role of writing, the female universe, Italian politics, the city as a labyrinth, the maternal image, and finally "la frantumaglia."

The role of writing

Ferrante discusses the function of writing at the beginning of the book with the exchange between the author and the Italian director Mario Martone, before, during and after the filming of *Troubling Love*. In this exchange we learn more about her reactions to the transformation of her first novel into a film. At the beginning, this transformation is felt with the anguish of seeing

> … in somebody else's writing ... what I have really told and be disgusted by it; or to find the weakness, or simply to realize what it is missing, what I should have told but I have not because of my inability or shyness,

> because of my self-limited literary choices, because of my superficiality. (23)

Only later, the transformation is accepted when she remarks that "I clearly saw for the first time what a disquieting story I had told" (53). When the film is released the author confesses that her worries have been confirmed: the book and its inner "holy core" have been stripped of their literary "texture" and the book, "the places, the people and the facts displayed themselves in their most material determination and, to my eyes, in their naked identifiability" (53). Her written word that is "masked or invented to make the novel work, becomes emotionally irrelevant and almost invisible on the screen; while, the living core that animates everything reveals itself in an unsustainable force" (54). Ferrante, however, praises the director for having focused the eye of the camera on the two most important features of the book: the relationship between Amalia and Delia (mother and daughter) and the game of bodies and clothes. The written words have found a visual representation, becoming a more biting bodily experience as people, environments and clothes appear depicted in their sexual and sensual essence: "You displayed the bodies of Caserta, her uncle, Antonio, her father … entangled in hatred, complicity and weakness, hierarchically constituted through a network of misery, power and subjection" (54). Even Delia's obsession with her mother and her body is displayed in the film in its essence; the fusion of the daughter's body into her mother's is a "moment in the iconography of the female body today, a synthesis of the woman in search of herself, a movement that for Delia goes from the icy masculine disguise to the recovery of the original body of her mother …" (57). This epistolary exchange with the director testifies how the author has selected those letters that express her concerns about

the difference between the written narrative representation and a cinematic transposition that, according to Ferrante, eventually deprives her novel of its inner texture.

The content of her correspondence with Martone can be restricted within its boundaries or it can be added to the letters that follow in *La Frantumaglia*. In this particular case, however, this epistolary exchange emphasizes the role of language and writing that Ferrante seems to present at every stage of the book. From her first letters, in fact, it soon becomes clear that language and writing are for her an aesthetic elaboration of a personal experience with no particular pedagogical, metaphysical or philosophical desire: they are the ecstatic self-abandonment, the representation of the intoxicating pleasure of communicating and of producing realities through a tool which is felt to be extremely alive and powerful, as seen in a previously mentioned quotation:

> In my experience, the pleasure-pain of writing touches every part of the body. When the book is finished, you feel like you have been searched with excessive intimacy and you wish for nothing other than regaining distance and returning to its former completeness. (60)

The whole process of remembering presents itself as a response to a personal narrative urge and a desire to write that she often visually represents through the metaphorical image of dressmaking:

> The expression is to "cut a dress on someone." I imagined it hid a malignant meaning: a malicious aggression, a violence that ruins clothes and obscenely uncovers the body; or even worse a magic art able to mold the body to the point of obscenity. Today that meaning seems neither negative nor obscene. Actually I am fascinated by the connection between cutting, dressing and telling. It seems captivating to me that this connection produced a metaphor for evil gossiping. If the mothers' dressmakers learned how to cut the dresses over their bodies while stripping them naked or if they took in the dresses to restore the women's body that they have and that they have always had, in dressing them they would strip them: their body and their age would no longer be a mystery of no importance. (16)

The female universe

In this process of "cutting a dress on herself" and on women in general, readers gradually learn what Ferrante feels about the female universe, about women, characters she sees as symbolic muses who by stripping themselves, attempt to reassemble the pieces of their lives overcoming their "frantumaglia," their "spleen." This is what Julia Kristeva calls "fundamental and congenital deficiency,"[60] a flaw that women carry since their birth and that makes them sick and depressed before an unbearable reality. Ferrante's "women" are tragic figures that cannot be compared to female archetypal characters such as Desdemona, Cordelia, or Ophelia. The Shakespearean women experience change, gain insight, and acquire spiritual and metaphysical value, despite the high prices that they have to pay: their struggle and their defeat occur for a reason and have logic. "All tragedies" says Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, discussing the classic type, "emphasize and exhibit the omnipotence of an external fate. The tragedies leave us with a sense of supremacy, of impersonal power and of the limitation of human effort" (209).

On the other hand, when reading Ferrante's own interpretation of her protagonists in *La Frantumaglia*, the sense is that Olga's and Delia's losses, as Ferrante explains in the book, taken as the source of their "tragedy," cannot be brought back to any tragic plots. There is no sense of an omnipotent, external or impersonal power in their struggles: everything is human and earthly-based, and the quest of women like Olga, Delia and Leda, in search of the antidotes to bear sorrow, death, loss, delusion, and the heaviness of life, is the quest of everyday women. What Ferrante reveals is the symbolic struggle that goes back to the origin of life when the embryo fights to become a fetus

[60] *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia,* 12

while growing in the darkness of the maternal womb. This is a struggle that metaphorically takes the shape of

> … la *frantumaglia* [that] is an unstable landscape, an air or water mass of infinite wreckage that violently appears to the self as its only true interiority. The *frantumaglia* is the sediment of time without the order of a story, or a tale. The *frantumaglia* is the effect of the sense of loss, when you have the certainty that all that seems stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of ruins that we think we are seeing. The *frantumaglia* is to perceive with great anguish the crowding heterogeneity from which, by living, we take our voice and in which our voice is doomed to disappear. (109)

This "frantumaglia" is the "disease" that afflicts Ferrante's protagonists, it is the filter through which they make sense of the world, it is the main cause of their alienation. Their struggles (and their representations) may appear an overly-discussed cliché, at times making these women pathetic and boring, but the author's language calls forth profound interior discomfort in female readers, who experience guilt and sympathy at the same time, a kinship with an author they barely know. Just like her novels, her letters allow a profound sense of immersion: as Kegan Gardiner once said, both writer and reader can "relate to the text as though it were a person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathically or from whom one might be separated and individuated."[61] While reading her letters, readers read and explore also what is private in their lives and what is public, as Ferrante takes sources from ordinary instances

> … in which people I know or have known really found themselves; I go back to "real" experiences, not as they actually occurred but rather by adapting as "really happened" only the emotions or fantasies born in the years in which that experience was lived. So what I write is full of references to situations and events that really took place, reorganized and reinvented not as they originally happened. (61)

[61] *On Female Identity*, 358

The female readers are never placed in a position to dispute or misunderstand the factuality of her testimony: they are led through the facts as they are reconstructed into the narrative form. With this act of reading, they participate in the process of making testimony, thus accomplishing, in this way, a final connection with the author.

This gender assumption is confirmed by looking closer at those parts of *La Frantumaglia* where the author inscribes herself in a genealogy of women writers, writers who may have influenced or possibly guided the writer's hand. These writers are women who have taken a step forward from their predecessors (Caterina Percoto, Neera and Matilde Serao) and who, in their art, have portrayed the crisis and the trends of current times, especially the transformation of a woman from a passive performer of a social role (mother-wife), playing roles imposed by the society, into an active individual who claims and defends personal desires, beliefs, wishes and losses.

The works of Alba de Cespedes, Gianna Manzini, and Elsa Morante, are identified by Ferrante as "prosthesis," as parts of "writing [that] is also the story of what we have read and read now, of the quality of our readings; a good story is the one written from the bottom of our life, from the core of our relationships with others, from the books we have liked" (149). Together with Fausta Cialente, Anna Banti, Dacia Maraini, Lalla Romano, Laura Mancinelli, and Oriana Fallaci, these women writers act as a source of inspiration for their strong desire to explore and discuss the formative process of the female emancipation in Italy. Like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gertrude Stein, these women struggled to forge a literature of their own, a space that would allow them their own identity. Moving into what Elaine Showalter calls a "self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for

identity,"[62]these writers' works sought to discuss a quest for self definition, for the construction of a female identity that could stand isolated and independent. This is a writing that formulates rules about the female identity that eventually does not conform to the standard male narrative canon. For these reasons, women's writing appears more personal, filled with autobiographical participation to the text marked by constant crossing of the self who writes and the self who is written, distinguished by the distinctive line between the public and the private. In these writings we read about other women who go through the process of recomposure and decomposure as they shed their previous self in order to forge a new identity. This is a writing that often originates in the need for love, in what Ferrante calls "the central experience of our existence":

> Even though it may appear senseless, we feel really alive only when we have an arrow in our heart that we drag along day and night, wherever we go. The need for love sweeps away any other need, but, on the other hand, it motivates all our actions. Just read Book IV of the *Aeneid*; the building of Carthage stops when Dido falls in love. The city would continue to prosper and grow powerful if Aeneas stayed. But he leaves, and Dido kills herself and Carthage is transformed from a potential city of love into a city with a mission of hate. Individuals and cities without love are a danger to themselves and to others. (53)

Ferrante seems to share the re-elaboration of already existent themes by shaping them to conform with her needs: Rita Felski's lists of "madwomen in the attic, female body imagery, mother-daughter relationships, father-daughter incest, lyric *écriture feminine* … lesbian affiliations and romances, concentric form … jewelry and clothing, cooking and eating,"[63] are all parts of Ferrante's repertoire and those of other female writers who have faced a similar struggle between the private and the public. And this has been done, as

[62] *A Literature of Their Own,* 13
[63] Ibid. 321

already specified, through autobiographies, confessions, diaries, letters, narrative tools that easily allow the blurring of public and private, avoiding detachment or objectivity.

Although the texts may differ for contents, social backgrounds, for ideological purposes, as Felski points out, "they share an explicit rhetorical foreground between a female author and a female reader and an emphasis upon the referential and denotative dimension of textual communication rather than its formal specificity."[64] As Elaine Showalter adds, their literature is the

> … product of a delicate network of influences operating in time, and it must be analyzed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page, a form that itself is subject to a network of influences and conventions, including the operations of the marketplace.[65]

The Italian female writers, foremothers of Ferrante and of her narrative style, have undergone a similar process of development and change. They are the product of their own uncertain and unstable time. They have read and appreciated their foreign colleagues such as Woolf, de Beauvoir, Mansfield and their writing testifies to a more participated interpretation of the reality, through a writing that appears always in search of new paths and new voices. These writers show the urgency, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi argues, "to develop matrilineal structures, recast female models against gender and class roles, customs, and beliefs, and articulate a counterdiscourse to masculine cultural politics."[66] For these reasons, as seen earlier, the form of their art will take the shape of confessions, autobiographies, letters, and memoirs, seen as authentic expression of their own lives. These forms are often considered too excessive and unnecessary, raising the question of the rules of "decorum and art": as Pickering-Iazzi concludes, "the sustained

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[64] "On Confession," 83
[65] *A Literature of Their Own,* 12
[66] "The Politics of Gender and Genre in Italian Women's Autobiography of the Interwar Years," 177

endeavors of literary women to speak veraciously of modern female identity with images and expressive forms of their own breaks the rules of decorum and art, raising issues about the nature of artistic sincerity…."[67]

It is exactly this "sincerity," however, that makes the female literature of this period the most illuminating of the universal and individual themes these writers want to investigate. Gianna Manzini, Anna Banti, Fausta Cialente, Anna Maria Ortese, Elsa Morante, and Dacia Maraini, among others, will create spaces to put "into discourse alternative perceptions of life and society, embedded in personal history."[68] These representations of self-knowledge, as Pickering-Izzi concludes,

> … have the potential to celebrate through counter valorization, another way of seeing, unsanctioned even unsuspected, in the dominant culture. The stories women writers tell of female self-creation, grappling with institutionalized mechanisms of gender and class oppression, articulate possibilities for personal and social change, a purpose which distinguishes this autobiographical project from that of the male authors.[69]

The urgency to testify, confess and excuse herself, will become the trademark of the female representation of feminine models that will always re-contextualize and investigate with the spirit and the courage of what Virginia Woolf defines as a "lion tamer." The words must explain and portray the courage to talk about those realities connected to the body, its hidden anxiety, its delirium, its wiseness, its powerful supremacy over the soul.

These themes, approaches and forms of female literature are believed to be at the basis of Ferrante's work even if she claims to have no specific affiliations with any Italian feminist school of thought or with any other women writers or to have a close

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[67] "The Politics of Gender and Genre in Italian Women's Autobiography of the Interwar Years ,"180
[68] Ibid. 181
[69] Ibid. 182

connection with any of the most relevant female writers of modern times. The writer admits that

> While writing I limited myself to reading from time to time books that kept me not nice but good company. I have quite a number of them which I call books of encouragement: Tozzi's *Adele*, de Cespedes's *Dalla parte di lei*, Manzini's *Lettera a un editore*, Morante's *Menzogna e Sortilegio* or *Arturo's Island*, etc. No matter how incongruous it may seem, the book that kept me company while I was working on *The Days of Abandonment* was de Lafayette's *Princess of Clèves. (87)*

It is possible, however, to draw many connections between the contemporary writer and her predecessors. As already seen, Ortese's *La città involontaria*, for example, is openly described as being of interest for her discussion of Naples and admired by Ferrante for her ability to talk about the city with such an intense passion:

> I feel attracted above all by the Ortese of *La città involontaria.* If I were able to write again about that city, I would try to put together a text able to explore the direction suggested in those pages, a story of small miserable violence, a precipice of voices and events, gestures that are minimal and terrible. (66)

Writing in a way that Marguerite Duras would call "organic," Ferrante places herself closer to another important female writer when she talks about showing a "masculine hand" and the need to "write like a real man" (87). In these statements we seem to read Natalia Ginzburg who in her masterpiece "*Il Mio Mestiere*" argues that "at that time I terribly wished to write as a man, I had the fear of other people realizing I was a woman because of what I was writing" (77-8). Thus, through the letters, readers witness Ferrante's individualistic approach to literature, an approach that retains, however, clear traces of feminist literature and thought that inscribe her in a precise genealogy of women writers.

Italian Politics

Proceeding along the contents of *La Frantumaglia*, in the fragmented snapshots of her life contained in her personal "diary," Ferrante tells readers her views on the "traditional illusionism of the politicians, of their ability to pretend, even within the democratic institutions they should willingly serve, to be kind gods of a certain Olympus from which they rule over the destiny of poor mortals" (101). In this letter, she reveals with no fake or diplomatic constructions her political opinion and her strong adversity for a famous Italian politician. Here, there is no political intent or specific propaganda: the author's purpose testifies a strong will and commitment to the freedom of expression, to the independence of words, of the individual words from any canonic and binding semantic rules that may constrain and limit the delivery of the real message. Among the semantic layers that a single word may convey, Ferrante chooses the one that better interprets the duty of the novel to emerge

> … from metaphor (literature, good or bad, is always metaphor), but only to highlight that it is necessary to have stories able to say more directly, even through literature, the reasons for our revulsion as citizens. In short, in novels, clear questions should be transformed in such a way as this: is it true that Berlusconi *can be* a great statesman because he *is* a great entrepreneur? How did we ever come to believe that there is a connection between the two things? Have we been convinced by the good and fine things done by this great entrepreneur? What are these things? What deserving work has convinced us of his abilities as a great statesman? Perhaps is it his bad television, the one produced by his esteemed employees? (100)

Ferrante's purpose in this letter is to unveil the mystery under the mythic role of a hero who has cloaked himself with this disguise, this illusionistic and powerful attempt to cast his spell over the common people:

> It is this credulity not of *citizens* but of the *public* that I find interesting from a narrative point of view. If I were able to write about our

> Berlusconian country not through allegories, parables and satires, I would like to find a plot and characters able to well represent the mythology in which the Berlusconi symbol is dangerously grafted on. I say 'symbol' because the man will disappear, his personal and management troubles are major, and his political struggle will take him one way or another out of the picture. But his rise as "*leader máximo*" within democratic institutions, the construction of his semblance of a democratically elected economic- political-television dux, will remain a model that is perfectible and repeatable. (101)

This letter, while displaying Ferrante's political views in her strong critical tones, also discusses the role of writing for the author: a writing that has to manifest the deep sense of "sanctification" of the language. Words are not an illusionist game, they can not be covered, transformed, violated, hidden or owned by people who take "possession of commas, periods, sighs, regret and pale memories" (103); words have to talk the language of truth with no secondary layer of meaning. The semantic value should not only tell "of today's political dangers but also ask if it is still possible that from a naïve public there comes forth critical citizens able to pull big wigs and leading characters down from the media Olympus turning them back into people among people" (102).

It is exactly this role of language that justifies her decision to remain anonymous: this recurrent topic in *La Frantumaglia* is dismissed by the author by exalting the role of her written words and the process of creation that the book embodies:

> Then the story takes off, the pieces that are already written acquire energy and suddenly find the way to join together; then writing becomes a pleasure, the hours are a time of intense jouissance. The characters don't leave you anymore, they have their time-space in which they are alive, are more and more clear; they are inside and outside of you, they are firmly in the roads, in the houses, in the places where the event must take shape. The thousand possibilities of narration self selects and the choices appear inevitable, definite. (76)

The independent organism is still part of herself and

> … the stories you tell, the words you use and work on, the characters you try to give life to are only instruments with which you entrap that slippery thing, nameless, and formless which belongs only to you and which is, however, a sort of key for any door. It is the real reason for spending so much time in your life sitting at a table typing keys, filling pages. (76)

The biographical element is the self that is "told" and through the writing it is sublimated and made powerful.

Remarkable as they are, these early letters, together with other interviews that Ferrante has given via mail and that are included in *La Frantumaglia*, are only small steps, small details in a vaster and more complex scheme: they are the prologue to the real climax of the book. Readers perceive that these previous letters have only been the scheduled 'fittings' **--** to use her favorite image **--** before the final display of her dress-identity. The reading of Ferrante's book to this point has been a necessary preparation for the reader to access the core of her ideas in two later sections of the book, "the monster in the closet" and "the mother's image," parts of its final chapter, "la frantumaglia."

The city as a labyrinth

In this gradual encounter with the artist, readers know about her city, Naples, which appears as a constant element in many of the 'fragments' of this book as in all her novels. This is a city that seems to be the point of ignition of all misdeeds, rejected and loved at the same time. A city felt like "an extension of your own body, a matrix of perception, a term of comparison for any experience. All that has been meaningful and lasting for me, has Naples as its setting and its dialect as its voice" (66). But Ferrante feels the city also as a constant danger for her body and her memories; a city that keeps coming back hunting the mature writer-woman:

> My Naples is the "vulgar" Naples of people who have reached "security" but are still terrified of the necessity to go back to "earn" the day with temporary jobs; people pompously honest, but in fact ready to commit little misdeeds to make a good impression; people who are noisy, loud, boastful, seeking laurels but also at some level Stalinist, drowned in the harshest dialect, coarse and sensual; people without minimal petit-bourgeois decorum but with the drive to display at least its superficial marks; people who are decent but potentially criminal, ready to sacrifice themselves at the first opportunity, or by necessity, so as not to look more stupid than others. (67)

The author puts this city on her shoulders as a "synthesis, a surrogate to always keep in mind that the power of life is damaged, humiliated by the unfair ways of life" (67), and she will always refers to this *napoletaneità* to explain her thesis.

This city, however, is not the one readers are more familiar with, the one portrayed by Eduardo De Filippo, Raffaele Viviani, Salvatore Di Giacomo, Matilde Serao or other artists. Their "napoletanità," as displayed in their theatrical or narrative works, is embodied in the loud and colorful mass of people, servants, wives, clerks, unemployed and small criminals who are all united by the same stubbornness and inventiveness to survive through a web of hilarious lies, secrets, expectations, envies and dreams. Each protagonist has a face, a body, a bundle of emotions and behaviors: these are individuals not yet anonymous but vibrant, self sustained and independent, single human beings who are often depicted in their poverty, their suffering, their ignorance and their obsession of a better future. These individuals are working class people, struggling to reach middle class status or people who are already bourgeois: in either case, they share the same burden of difficulties. Luciano Codignola explains in his study on Neapolitan theatre that

> … whatever their class, sex, age, and culture they share one characteristic: a profound lack of motivation hardly hidden by a certain liveliness in their attitudes which corresponds to the southern veneer, of the Neapolitan color. While their words are abundant and picturesque, their real behavior is inarticulate, sinister; it is the behavior of those who react to their own

> being almost entirely on an emotional plane, as if they had experienced the uselessness of having an authentic awareness of their situation, or as if they had never had it. [70]

This sort of Neapolitan fatalism appears strong and enduring in De Filippo's or in Viviani's works: here, people's suffering, the social conditions, the insufficient education and the poor culture are faced and fought with cunning acumen and a vivid spirit of initiative. In these circumstances "the family," Codignola explains, will be acknowledged as the only surviving and sacred institution,

> … the buffer between the individual and a social power which has systematically destroyed all those institutions which have become instruments of meditation…[the] characters hold on to the family, as their only cover, beyond which there is nothing but a pulverized social tissue – a void, chaos, absolute doubt, the metaphysical leap. The family is their only means of protection and survival, a source of comfort for which they pay by renouncing – perhaps with few regrets – any participation in the institutions of social life. [71]

The exclusiveness of the family bonds eventually shapes all behaviors and events and it represents the centre of gravity that pulls and affects the narrative representations and the theatrical ones. These works focus on the fight to survive the misery of a life that can not be changed but that can at least be smoothened and made less harsh. In this proverbial acceptance of the human destiny, of the "*mal de vivre,*" the Neapolitan human being, as depicted by these authors, never appears annihilated or totally deprived of his dignity: the Sisyphean effort to get to the following day, in De Filippo's words "*Ha da passà à nuttata*[the night will eventually pass] reveals that even in the total acknowledgment of the destiny, there is still a chance that tomorrow may be better and may change the course of the events.

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[70]" Reading De Filippo," 109
[71] Ibid. 110-111

The Neapolitan protagonist thus becomes a hero who stops at the edge of complete defeat a moment before falling down: these dramas and narrative works depict with romantic and realistic tones, at times pathetic, journalistic, romantic but always realistic and affectionate, the street alleys, the balcony with flowers and linen, the people at the windows or sitting in the middle of the street chatting, gossiping, working with the desire to support each other as in a big enlarged family. There is a primitive, almost virgin essence in these lower classes that is still retained as they fight to survive their misery and their "*mal de vivre,*" treasuring beliefs and love, and appearing uncontaminated by more polluting modern trends. These works do not look for an alibi or an excuse: they only care to represent a contemporary vital image of Naples and its people.

The Naples that instead appears in Ferrante's *La Frantumaglia* is closer to the one narrated in Anna Maria Ortese's book and previously quoted. The contemporary artist looks at her predecessor for the power of describing the lower classes, the "evils" of Naples, the indifference of the higher classes and the secular problems in the city with a lucid and passionate writing, not more moralistic or romantic, but a severe "*j'accuse*" against those people who have contributed to the decline of the city. Our journey is not in the colored and friendly sounds and smells of Naples, but in the dark and "lacerating" caves of an "underground" city. Readers find the faces of the same people who inhabited the theater of De Filippo or the journalistic works of Serao, but they have lost their inner vital life and now appear speechless, anonymous or overly noisy. Ferrante's representations become, in the ferocious and dry language of Ortese, terrible and painful, and readers are overwhelmed by the strong and stubborn will to give voice to this crowd,

to use the language as a surrogate to the speechlessness that would be even more intolerable. Ortese uses language to materialize secular pain and sorrows and Ferrante follows this trend by narrating even the most repulsive and mysterious features of the city. There is no moralistic or pedagogical effort in their representations: as Ferrante states

> It is an experience of a city that you don't erase even if you want to and that becomes useful anywhere. I can wander through streets and alleys by simply lying on my bed with my eyes closed; when I return there I have initial moments of unrestrained enthusiasm; then I start hating it in the space of a single afternoon and I regress, I return speechless, I feel a sense of suffocation, a general malaise. (67)

The city is the past but it constantly overlaps with the present becoming the

> … perverse mermaid, using streets, alleys, that incline and that descent, and the poisoned beauty of the gulf [of Naples, *translator's note*]. But in fact, it remains a place of decomposition, disarticulation, and instability that I painfully learned to negotiate a little, remaining on the outside. And yet it is my experience and I hold many important affections there. I feel its human richness, its complex layers of cultures. I gave up renouncing it. (68)

The maternal bond with the city that has generated her feelings and now is a second skin over her soul, brings Ferrante to narrate about Naples and inserts it as almost a fastidious background into all her stories. For the writer, Naples embodies the mysteries, the sorrows, the ambiguities, the humiliations and the extraordinary efforts to survive as a human being: in Ferrante's words, Naples has been transformed into a dangerous "character," a difficult language, an ideology, that affects and influences each gesture, or word. In a recent article published on the New York Times, Ferrante sadly argues that "what makes people angry is … the more general acquiescence of Naples, the habit of

surviving in inefficiency and disorder. Crime, in this city, has become a destiny; it has the power of things that are well known but about which there is nothing to be done."[72] Thus, the force of Ferrante's words is based on the urgency to give a voice to this "general acquiescence of Naples," to name each street, each building, as if they were people. It is based on the curiosity of one who goes around the "*quartieri*" to look at each single detail of this "*napoletanità*:" she collects, examines, dissects, eventually cataloguing each aspect of Naples and writes a final report on its singularity. The image delivered to us through her words acquires a powerful graphic texture and reminds us of Roland Barthes' reflections on photography, and in particular the distinction he makes in his *Camera Lucida* between the concept of *studium* and the concept of *punctum* when dealing with the effects of pictures on the audience.

Barthes believes that there is a general effect, interest or taste for or in a photograph; an "*I like it"* or "*I do not like it"* effect that we feel when looking at it. This effect demonstrates the general intent of the photographer to talk about the nature of the picture and the *studium* would be the audience's reaction in approving or disapproving the picture. According to Barthes, in *studium* "we participate culturally in the faces, the gestures, the settings and the actions," (26) contained in the picture. When we look at it, according to the *studium* principle, we are generally attracted by it, superficially committed to it. We can hear its reasons but we are not pierced, wounded or overwhelmed by the picture.

But the picture can also generate a second effect, a deeper, more mobilizing and almost troubling effect. This is the *punctum* concept, that particular effect that disturbs,

[72] The article is included in the appendix.

speaks to, cuts and stings the audience. This effect wounds us and as Barthes remarks, "it is that accident which pricks me but also bruises me, is poignant to me" (27).

This same difference between the *studium* and the *punctum* effect could be applied when reading Ferrante's written narratives. When readers approach Ferrante's interpretation and representation of Naples, its inhabitants and its fragmented self, they feel wounded, touched; they sense that this is not a simple display of a figure or a feature, "but of a real being, not a being, but a quality, a soul" (Barthes 75). Ferrante's judgments or comments must not be read as psychological truths but probably suspects, doubts of a person who still needs to investigate the multitude of issues of the city. Her representation of Naples, as it appears in *La Frantumaglia* and in her novels, does not display the canonic, melodic and comic pictures of a romantic city but the hallucinatory descent into the underworld where the proverbial Neapolitan fatalistic ability to cope with the uncertainties of life has been replaced by a new merciless cynicism, a human degradation, and a moral corruption and exploitation of the human feelings that "bruises and stings us." Any other modern representation of Naples that distances itself from these features is an operation that the writer defines as "… the staging of media clichés, the poetic version of a popular magazine article, of a television report, of sociological research, of a party position" (69).

But Naples is not only used as the explanations of an individual world of anxiety or of defeated expectations: it is the map of Ferrante's own memory, and the key to understanding her work in general and *La Frantumaglia'*s structure, in particular.

Thinking back to this original city, readers realize that this regression must not be seen as a nostalgic attempt to contemplate the life of a "past city" with a childish gaze,

envying the naïveté and the innocence of a lost world: it becomes the attempt to gain insightful directions not to survive the present but to layout and prepare a new future. Thus, Naples becomes for Ferrante and her heroines what Berlin is for Walter Benjamin who in his personal fragmented sketches, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, manifests the same imperative urgency to wander in the city to recapture what is lost and gain expertise from it.

> Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks. [73]

The urban wanderer requires "schooling," training to understand and capture the "labyrinths" in the city, the city-labyrinth that is also the labyrinth of life. The adult Benjamin wanders in his childhood world in the attempt, as Graeme Gillock argues, "… to dereify and redeem the objects and spaces of the city that have become frozen and forgotten in adulthood … retrieving buried hopes, aspirations and dreams … frustrated during adulthood."[74] The adult Benjamin recreates a tale of historiography illuminating on those details, streets, churches, ports that have been damaged, destroyed or lost with the passing of the time. His journey into the past is a journey into the distance and into time, and Gillock adds, "… the movement in memory is like that in a labyrinth,"[75]and to move "around a labyrinth is a circling around in which one revisits the same places. And yet, such motion indirectly leads towards the heart of things."[76] In this "circling," pieces

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[73] *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 53-54
[74] *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the city*, 65
[75] Ibid. 68
[76] Ibid ,68

of the city and of the memory are "revisiting" over and over again and therefore the "persistent going … constitutes a perpetual rediscovery."[77] Gilloch explains that for Benjamin: "he presents a labyrinth (the city) within a labyrinth (memory) within yet another labyrinth (the text). To remember the city and to write about it, one must lose oneself in mazes that correspond to the very structure of the metropolis itself."[78] It is in Benjamin's interpretation of the city as a place of sorrow, of something irremediably lost and it is in his reconstruction of the "painful" labyrinth in the city, and his concept of the city as a labyrinth, that the writer meets the modern Italian wanderer.

Likewise, Ferrante rediscovers her past every time she goes back to Naples, a return she can accomplish by simply closing her eyes: "I can wander through streets and alleys simply by lying on my bed with my eyes closed" (*La Frantumaglia*, 67). She can get lost in her city-labyrinth that is also the labyrinth of her memory and her letters: everything is intertwined together. If we apply this theory to Ferrante's letters, we feel that all the pieces of a larger puzzle fall into place: the miniature sketches of her letters can be read as miniature labyrinths in which the author plays the role of a modern Ariadne, allowing readers to proceed, exit the maze and enter into another one. What readers come to acknowledge is that everything that has been said or explained in the previous labyrinth, is encountered again and rediscovered in the following one, allowing them to acquire more and more "schooling" and move ahead. The circling around becomes, in Ferrante, a continual return to the main point of origin: Naples, her mother, and her family. Everything started there: this recognition, however, is transformed into a

[77] Ibid. 68
[78] Ibid. 68

slow journey of perceptions, assumptions, epiphanies that will resolve only in the last chapter "la frantumaglia," in which she provides the solution to the ultimate labyrinth.

At the end of this long journey, readers realize that their moving from a labyrinth into another and another, in reality becomes their own path toward reconciliation and recognition: by moving forward, all the while becoming wiser, readers can eventually plunge into the "closet," the last labyrinth, that is, the darkest recesses of their minds, the hidden, rejected memories where all solutions reside. The closet is, that "something more elusive, a space in the memory permanently inhabited only by myself …a sort of place of repetition like in certain dreams: always the same action, always the same urge,"(127). The monster in the closet becomes, in Ferrante's words, the obscure 'states,' those forces that have pushed us towards certain choices in life, towards Pirandellian masks that we have been obliged to wear so as not to look straight into the monster's eyes, the often traumatic point of origin of our story and her stories. "I have written many times about … the closet," she notes, "but without good results. Over the years it has become a difficult topic to set down on a white page. Nevertheless, my two books surely move from there" (130). In portraying Delia, Olga and Leda, Ferrante has mirrored the process of looking inside the closet and the effort of moving away from it: as Ferrante explains, these are women who, only when forced to open that closet door, have faced the harshness of their existence and have decided to wear a new dress/identity. But the monster is, above all, as Ferrante explains citing Freud's description of the Oedipus' complex, the troubling relationship with the mother, the primordial sin of existence: the stages in the lives of human beings, childhood, adolescence, marriage, and parenthood, "can not erase from the female life the troubling love for the mother figure, the only love-

hate that lasts for ever," (148) she concludes. Everything *is* encapsulated there, Ferrante argues, and only when we can grasp it, understand it and move on, can we reconcile with our real selves.

The maternal image

Ferrante's representation and interpretation of the maternal image seems to suggest more than a simple sexual and social meaning of motherhood: it illuminates on the atavist and most complicated relation between a mother and her daughter, the daughter's obsession and idealization of the mother's body and the final acknowledgment of having lived a life trying to possess that very body. "The cathexis between mother and daughter, essential, distorted, misued, is the great unwritten story," declares Adrianne Rich in her investigation on motherhood: "there is probably nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other."[79] Ferrante's disclosure of her own mother's image attempts to catch a glimpse of this "flow of energy," of the "essential" story between a mother and her daughter: she gives this portrait in the chapter "The Monster in the Closet" and concludes it in "the Mother's Image." This is an image, however, that is only virtually restricted into the boundaries of these sections because, in spirit, it seems to spread all over Ferrante's letters.

Ferrante's mother is immediately described as a creature to fear, to love, to imitate, "our mother had a miraculous and cruel body; she would do wonderful things," whose temporary absence is almost felt as an unbearable abandonment, "the period of her absence was interminable. In my mind I imagined abominable things and what I

[79] *Of Woman Born,* 225

imagined made me feel filthy in my own eyes" (165). The author-daughter created "fantasies [that] became an unbearable reality":

> My mother never set foot outside the house without taking care of every personal detail and this plunged me into a state of growing anxiety. Each of her gestures before the mirror appeared something more to me: something more dangerous, a further offering of her own person to the predatory nature of streets, public transportations and shops. I followed her step by step around the house, I was angry with her, I hated her. I thought: they will steal her away from us; she wants it to happen, she makes herself so pretty in order to leave us and never come back. When the house door would close behind her elegant body, I would be seized with panic, I would tremble, and I would be unable to calm down. (170)

While these words display the longing for a mother's approval, nurture, tenderness, touch and voice, they introduce the painful acknowledgment that talking about a mother means talking about one's self and one's longed desire to shape oneself according to that image. "You need to keep an eye on yourself, nurse your own individual growth in the inner worlds that we have inherited, and *drill* [emphasis mine] there looking beyond the received language" (98), reveals Ferrante, sharing with the readers the harshness of digging deeply in her self, "it was often painful because what I was telling was mine, I had worked hard to dig it out and give it a shape" (99). It is in these revelations that readers perceive what Ferrante is achieving: she is not only reporting on her past, she is also describing her own passion for her mother, her desire to understand the woman through her gestures, her smell, her words and works and in a way to understand all the differences that might have separated her from her own mother.

The long section on women's clothes becomes, for example the instrument through which Ferrante finally sews her mother's image:

> What has really counted for me is the memory of the confident way in which my mother's hands and fingers passed the needle and the thread in the fabric and they slightly pulled, and then returned to sink the needle

> point. That pricking, passing, pulling was done in such a quick and expert manner, it moved to be so straight with such a precision that , still today, it comes back into my mind for every well executed operation, and I am not happy that I don't remember the vocabulary she used any more. She talked of strings, of backstitch, certainly of chain stitch, of embroidery stitch, the rest of the words have faded; she did not want me to keep them, she wished me to learn something else. So, what has remained is especially her hand, with the nails that could not grow: it was as if they would bend forward, and the swollen blue veins on her back and the rough fingertips, pricked and re-picked, almost never protected by the thimble. (133)

The recovery of these past images, besides recreating a mother's image with mixed feelings of love, admiration, anger and frustration, attests to a daughter's unconscious desire of becoming purged once and for all of a mother's bond. These same images, however, at the same time, seem to inspire and ignite a sense of reconciliation:

> It was that sewing that enchanted me more than the cutting. The moving art of that hand that put together the pieces of fabric, it made stitches invisible, the shredded fabric resumed a soft continuity, a new compactness, it became a dress, a female body form, skin on skin, an organism that lay on her lap and at times slipped down to her feet, that was as excited as her hands and ready to go to the singer treadle. It was a coming and going that seemed like a dance, her hand passed the needle, her mouth bit the thread, her bust moved on the chair, turning to the sewing machine, her feet, big and of strong bone structure, leant on the treadle and started the singer needle movement, a quick movement along with a sound similar to rolling metal. (133)

The words run fast as the thread on the sewing machine and while shaping the fabric they shape the figure of her mother, a woman who would often look at the daughter with "her with her sad smile, her body curled up on the sewing, the shabby aspect" (134). This image of reproduction seems to echo Delia's wearing Amalia's blue suit in the last paragraphs of *Troubling Love*: the urgency to "wear" and feel her mother on herself leads Delia to take the dress and arrange it "to my satisfaction. I felt that that old garment was the final narrative that my mother had left me, and that now … it fit me like a glove"

(134). Dressing up with her mother's dresses to discover her mother and melting with her, may also generate feelings of rejection in the daughter, "those dresses gave me a sense of anxiety, they had a poison like Ness's shirt. With the years, her ability to sew started to weigh heavy on me. In the early adolescence already, I detested that ability; I was ashamed to go around with the dresses made by her" (*La Frantumaglia* 135).

It is probably this love and hatred, this appreciation and distance that Ferrante wants us to see, something that is quite natural in the mother-daughter bond: however, it is something else that she means, that she implies and performs through these letters. They become the open confession and justification for behaviors, gestures and thoughts she might have had towards her mother, the deep sense of guilt of not having been able to perform the role of the perfect daughter during her childhood and the desire to compensate for that. Reconciliation with the mother is reconciliation first with this sense of guilt and it takes the form of the different dresses/letters Ferrante sews/writes for the readers.

In addition to forcing reconciliation with a mother's image, the closet is the place for all the other fears, regrets, dreams and expectations that we have refused in our life as too fearful to face and accept. To force us out of this chaos, Ferrante intervenes as a guide, the dressmaker who orders together all the supplies/fears/dreams and forms the final dress, creating form from shapelessness, order from chaos, life from death: her written words

> … bear the movement of confusion. The self recounts calmly, it makes a clear synthesis, it lets events flow slowly. But when the wave of a feeling arrives, writing moves, it becomes more agitated; it turns around frantically absorbing everything, spreading remembrances and desires. (117)

This is why, according to Ferrante, writing by "absorbing everything" and becoming the mirror of "resemblances," of "desires," springs from psychological violence, mental oppressions, and ideological fears to which we have been exposed in life: in these cases language becomes an expression of those images that undermine our existence but that, nevertheless, are its constitutive parts. Proceeding along the final pages, we readers feel that this final chapter becomes the place of our pre-natal state, a place where we learn new gestures, words, silences. In addition to that, we perceive that the importance of the book does not merely reside in its unusual structure and planned organization, but, above all, in the author's insightful psychological discussion and interpretation of human thoughts and behaviors.

La Frantumaglia

This sense of belonging to the public sphere and the absence of any other explanation is testified also in the longest section of "*La Frantumaglia*," perhaps the most important part of the book.

This "*frantumaglia,*" a Neapolitan word her mother used to indicate something that made her sick and depressed, allows us to look closely at Ferrante's experiences which are equally felt by the readers. *La Frantumaglia* is for Ferrante the answer to all questions; it is the state of mind that recalls "a chaos of heterogeneous things in the head, detritus on a muddy water of the mind…point of origin of all those sorrows not belonging to a single obvious reason" (108) and that connects with a certain female way of being and feeling. It is Delia's journey to put together the pieces of her life:

> This woman enters the labyrinth of Naples in order to grasp the story, to put it in order, to relocate spaces and times and finally tell herself that story out loud. She tries, and in doing so she understands that if she succeeds, she will also manage to recuperate and incorporate her mother,

> her world, with wrongs, troubles, and passions spent or imagined, restrained energies, as well as those expanded within the few accessible channels. (68)

It is that feeling that pushes Delia, Olga, Leda and all the other women, "in search of something that she doesn't know and must discover" (70), to recover their identity. This struggle to overcome the "frantumaglia" does not only take the shape of a deadly fight against the male society that would see them destroyed: it is also the necessity to fight against that sense of inferiority that women feel for their own mothers, the necessity to get over the feeling "faded" and "fading" children of "shining" mothers.[80] It is the struggle to control that nausea that comes from the changing body, the troubling phases of the pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding that attack the body and cause physical and psychological distress. It is the timeless struggle to find an answer to "is it possible to continue living if you lose love? It seems a rather discredited theme, but in reality it is the rawest theme derived from women's lives. The loss of love is a gaping hole; it produces a void of meaning" (82). And La "frantumaglia" will lead the artist to follow "moment by moment, the contraction of real and metaphoric spaces around" (81) this state becoming the place where Ferrante reveals more about herself and becomes what Barthes often defines the "ludic game," the field where the author and the reader meet in a mutual transaction.

In these pages the transformation of women, the narration of episodes from her own past, the discussion of the "monster in the closet," of the role of the "cities" and of "female clothes," with their unique shapes and features, allow the readers to get closer to the author. In this field, free of any obstacles and barriers, female readers are asked to

[80] This is part of an interview released by the author to an Italian newspaper and added in the appendix of this essay.

meet the text and understand it in the way it was originally conceived. It is important to repeat that this most peculiar part of *La Frantumaglia* needs to appear at the end of the book: the author has conceived her work as a journey during which readers are forced to stop and proceed slowly, and by allowing themselves to embody and digest all her truths, they arrive at the end wiser than when they started.

In this final chapter, we finally understand that the real structure of the book is not linear but circular, going around and closer to the truths encapsulated in these last sections. While reading those parts we understand that our slow encounter with Ferrante was, in reality, an invitation to leave behind our ordinary and standardized frame of reference in reading life, and to ponder the possibility that we can access not one truth but several truths in interpreting the mysteries of our lives.

Challenges in the Translation

Ferrante's ability to defy and comply at the same time, with the canonical codes of contemporary women writing, reflects the author's coherent and strong commitment to the work itself, to its own impulses, its own requests, its tones, and ideas. By letting her writing take control over the page, the work appears floating between realism and allegory while often retaining a commitment to a quasi journalistic style. In the pseudo utopist freedom of her narrative work, the author, before a reality that fragments the self, investigates from within the reasons of such fragmentation not to discover universal truths but rather to point out those ever changing causes that have brought about the fragmentation. The journey must bring the acknowledgement of the causes that may change from woman to woman and may induce each of them to create different and parallel lives just to cope with these causes. The necessity to find alternatives to the inadequate present, pushes the fragmented woman to recreate a life that is always over the edge of what truth is and what truth should be.

Ferrante's writing feels the urge to follow, study and talk about these re-creations, these alternatives to "*la frantumaglia*" that women perform every day. The written text becomes the field in which Ferrante reveals the dynamic or passive forces of these women and the rhetoric and linguistic strategies applied by the author reveal what is underneath the reality. Readers are allowed to enter semantic zones where they remain lost and amazed before the manifold meanings, symbolic gestures, and rhetorical devices the author uses to describe the female universe. Through these devices and a language that must exalt the multiplicity, the ambiguity, the paradox, and the Derridean "*différance*," this universe appears fluid and complex at the same time.

For Ferrante, therefore, writing becomes a metaphor for living: it will follow and exploit all the potentialities of the fractures, the contradictions, the changes, and the colors of life. The utopian in Ferrante's writing becomes the movement toward the future, it becomes the consciousness of the possibilities that have not been accomplished yet but that are available to women and so become possibilities of changes and revisions.

Ferrante as a contemporary writer thus appears as a woman compelled to convey unexplored dimensions of human reality, especially women's realities in a way that transcends the personal and the individual and assumes a more collective dimension.

It is exactly in Ferrante's elaboration of a language that voices such a collective dimension that reside the obstacles encountered in translating *La Frantumaglia*.

As already explored in the previous sections, I must repeat that the organization of the book allows for an easier connection between the reader and the author thanks to the epistolary nature that, as seen, helps the reader to grasp the core of the author's ideas. The control that Ferrante operates on her language is represented by her avoidance of an elaborated poetic language in favor of a colloquial style embodied in short, simple and direct utterances. This colloquial nature has made the translation process easier: the language, however, presents obstacles that may blur and complicate this connection and cause linguistic difficulties. This difficulty does not derive from the fragmented structure of the work, which actually represents an important feature in some confessional works: as the feminist theorist Rita Felski points out, in confessions, any "aesthetic criteria are rejected as irrelevant: a conscious artistic structure is in fact suspect insofar as it implies

distance and control rather than an unmediated baring of the soul."[81] In Ferrante's case, the fragments are revealing since they are the form and the core of her work.

The occasional difficulty in translating the book arises at three main stages: first, when the author appears so taken away by her narrative stream of consciousness, that she forgets her readers who, in turn, can easily get lost following this thin narrative thread and lose "… their patient ability to grasp it from one side and pull it" (2). In these particular instances, the translator is equally likely to be lost in Ferrante's narrative maze, construed by the excessive juxtaposition of rhetorical figures and patterns. This happens, in particular, when the sentences appear long, repetitive, and occasionally unfamiliar:

> Mrs Caldaro's dress was for parties and balls; my mother sewed it, unstitched and re-sewed it, she gave it stitches and stitches. I was afraid of the needle, but I also liked it for the harmony of the seam it leaves behind as in a trail. My mother pricked the fabric with quick and agile gestures. She stayed concentrated on the chair, curled up, the dress to sew on her knees. Sometimes she had me thread the needle, if I insisted. I had to moisten the thread top by putting it into my mouth, then I had to tighten and twist the saliva-wet part with my tongue and my lips, eventually I had to pass the ready thread through the eye. It was beautiful to succeed the first time, while my mother praised me, but if I did not succeed it was equally beautiful. She took the thread again, put the top between her lips and gave it back to me to let me try again. Sometimes I twisted the wet thread between my thumb and my index finger to make it taut and pointed it as a needle. (166)

It almost seems that each sentence has been created as a world apart, as a microscopic miniature that needs to tell everything before readers finish reading it. This causes a saturation of concepts and ideas instead of creating a large tableau of contents and truths, building a distance between the text-author and the reader-translator who may feel lost in the crowded page.

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[81]" On Confession," 86

It is doubtless that to understand the role of "miniaturizing" in Ferrante's work becomes or rather, is, the key to understand the model on which the work itself is planned: each sentence, each letter, each chapter are *miniatures*, small mazes that need to contain a truth; they are not simply a fragment of a whole, but they are a whole that displays the self in its integrity and its complexity.

The second obstacle is encountered when we understand that the apparent informal style of her letters hides a more complicated and elaborated language, made dense and vibrant by those regionalisms that, instead of creating a common ground of understanding, affect interpretation and translation. In some cases, translating *La Frantumaglia* does not simply mean "to ascribe a value to referential expressions and detect what is left unstated"[82] as Dan Sperber would suggest, or "an understanding of the world and a kind of performance."[83] It becomes instead the descent into a hermeneutic dialogue between the author and her interior world, a Freudian interpretation of her apparent 'states' of mind, anxieties, illusions, and thoughts. In this case, the translation is not simply a mechanical exercise to re-verbalize in the target language contents of another language: it requires a previous knowledge of the regional semantic layers of meaning of single words as individual lexical units but also as parts of a more complex sublanguage, the Neapolitan, which is sensed as the natural background. To be more specific, the Neapolitan culture *is* the subculture of the book; it is the engine that has generated the author's compulsions: it is the place, she writes,

> … of decomposition, disarticulation, and instability that I painfully learned to negotiate a little, remaining on the outside. And yet it is my experience, I hold many important affections there. I feel its human richness, its complex layers of cultures. I gave up renouncing it. (68)

[82] "Rudiments de rhétorique cognitive," 392
[83] Ibid. 392

This is a dialect/language that is often rejected and felt as another physical and psychological abuse to erase from the protagonist's life. At the same time, it demands to be adored and revered since it represents the only link between the present and the past, as in Delia's case. The dialect in her life is, as Giancarlo Lombardi argues, "... identified as a maternal language, a semiotic language, a prosodic code that is shared only by a mother and her daughter,"[84] it is the umbilical cord that cannot yet be cut or erased.

To a translator who is not close to this culture and language and does not perceive this "amniotic link," this decoding and reformulation would present an additional obstacle and would deny the opportunity of sharing in the "complex layers of [the] culture[s]" present in their language.

Third, the text presents another challenge when its translation must deal with those metaphoric images that the author often uses to highlight, sometimes repetitiously, certain pillars of her writing: the sewing, clothes-making image (a metaphor for creation) and the city-labyrinth image (a metaphor for her memory and her texts) are, in fact, constant elements throughout the book.

> I left Naples very early; I had to live in different and distant places. I rarely got on well with the cities where I lived and now all of them appear only prosthetic with opposite effects on me: they are always dead and strange matter for me, or they are body on body, active parts of what you feel. It is only in this second case that, in good and in bad, cities are important to me. The others are only insignificant topographies. Even if they have great, evocative names and fascinating traces of a past, they are not able to inspire me, not even as a tourist; I have a poor interest for that kind of Touring Club-guide tourism. Since that experience of my late childhood, for me the real model of metropolitan involvement is Naples; it presses on me and confuses me while I run in the storm.
>
> I have to tell you though, that the epilogue of that run is essential to me. What I mean is the process of calming down, of regaining sight and hearing, of seeing the city as if I had redesigned it with my anxieties and my pleasures. I mean the use of a thread that reconnects places

[84] "Scambi d'Identità: il Recupero del Corpo Materno ne l'Amore Molesto," 288(my translation)

> fragmented by emotions and allows the loosing of the self and also the power of doing it. (151)

The challenge of translating these images thus becomes not only a traditional linguistic elaboration, but the necessity to reproduce what Danica Seleskovitch defines as "the chemistry of meanings, chemistry because an infinite number of combinations, each with a new signification, can be created from a limited number of linguistic elements."[85] It is those metaphors that make *La Frantumaglia's* fragments what they are: the rhetorical devices transcend their nature of creating a language of images to create the real image of the self. They are not simply an analogy found by the author to portray the truth: they are the truth, they help the author to create the memory, they are the memory itself. The devices do not assist the author in describing the past but they are the past and the token to read the present.

Metaphoric images and other difficult points in the book have required not only a traditional study of linguistic correspondences: the translator also had to step back, feel and share the "chemistry" of these metaphors, images, symbols and undertake a more detailed and detached psychological, social and almost anthropological analysis of the "combinations" of the "linguistic elements" to guarantee a fair equivalent in the target language.

Elena Ferrante's *La Frantumaglia* portrays the woman-artist's path along the labyrinth of a text in search of a complete representation of her identity. The 'fragmented' structure of the work eventually displays the uniform layout of a critical manual that readers are gradually trained to read and understand. In the planned and

[85] *Langage, langues et mémoire,* 49-50

mapped out learning, they can grasp a mature image of the artist whose work is one of the most important contemporary expressions of Italian writing.

APPENDIX

Two interviews[86]

The last two chronological interviews released by Ferrante were given on the occasion of the publication of her third novel, *The Lost Daughter*. These are interviews that came after many years of silence and both have been published in two major Italian newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica*. They appear relevant for the present study as they clarify and explain different issues regarding Ferrante's preferred topics and characters in particular for *The Lost Daughter.* For this reason, it has been considered important to transcribe the entire length of the interviews.

In the first interview, appeared in the Corriere della Sera's supplement "Io Donna" on November 5th 2006, two journalists , Marina Terragni and Luisa Muraro, asked Ferrante about the exceptional characterizations in *The Lost Daughter* and the topic of the "frantumato" self, central element in the novel.

The little girl's name is Elena like yours: is it a case? She is crooked, dirty and a little ugly. In your novels, there is often this couple: a beautiful and sensual mother, who radiates a charming light, and a "faded," cold daughter. It is as if during the reproduction the maternal power became weaker.[87]

In my experience the maternal superiority is absolute. You have to learn to accept it or you become "sick." For all our life, under the most different circumstances, the erotic value that the maternal body radiated only for us, will be a regret and a goal at the same time. I have never stopped feeling a faded daughter, not even when I became a mother myself. Actually, the bundle of the double function has become even more

[86] The two interviews are my translation
[87] The italic has been chosen to distinguish the questions from the answers

tangled. There was a time when I planned to describe the beautiful Helen of Troy as an ugly girl, full of animal fears and crushed by her mother's splendor, Leda, who was loved by Zeus, in the shape of a swan. In *The Lost Daughter,* the names have remained: they came from there.

You say that with your writing, you try to grasp the "living matter" that lies silently at the bottom of yourself. Is it the relationship with the mother that persistently demands to be told?

I think so. I have written many stories during the years, but eventually all have appeared unnecessary to me. It was only with *Troubling Love* that, for the first time, I had the impression to have touched something overwhelming.

This unhappiness between mother and daughter becomes the central core for the philosophy of the sexual difference. In the Neapolitan society, instead, it seems that it remains only unhappiness, a mortal disease exploited by men.

I don't know how Neapolitan mothers are. I know some mothers that I have met and who were born and lived in that city. They are happy and coarse women, violent victims, desperately in love with their men and their sons, willing to defend and serve them even if they crush and torment them. Women who are ready to claim that "they have to behave like men," but unable to admit, even to themselves, that in this way they push their men to become even more 'beasts.' It is not an easy task to be these mothers' daughters. Their extremely lively subordination, that is also coarse and suffered, makes identification and rejection difficult. You need to escape from Naples but also to escape from them. Only after, is it possible to see their torment as women, to feel the burden of

the masculine city over their shoulders, to feel remorse to have abandoned them and to learn how to love them and make them the point of ignition.

Leda's mother threatens to leave. Leda instead leaves and makes her mother's dream comes true. But then she returns to her daughters and claims to have been lucky that it took only three years to understand.

For Leda, returning to her daughters means placing the fullness of maternity in the center and not simply having given birth to them. At the beginning, with her escape, she has searched for emancipation and for an equal confrontation with the male world. Later, when she returns, her public life, her job, her thoughts and her loves clash with the importance of the maternal function. I believe that the risk Leda runs is based on the question: will I, a modern woman, be able to have my daughters love me, to love them without being forced to sacrifice myself and so to detest me?

Elena's little doll seems the custodian of a perfect maternity. But in her belly there is a putrid liquid, a worm: is it the maternal ambivalence that we need to accept?

I don't know. In a first version, the story focused a lot on the crude materiality of the pregnancy, of the delivery. There were very harsh paragraphs on the body that rebels, on the morning sickness, on the swelling of the womb, on the initial torment of the breastfeeding. I have changed all this. I am convinced it is necessary to talk about the dark side of the pregnant body, hidden to highlight the brighter side, as 'Mother of God.' In the novel there is a pregnant woman, Rosaria. She is a "*camorrista*" with no physical or moral class. For Leda, a cultivated woman, Rosaria's maternity is rough and insignificant. But a stream of fury starts exactly from Rosaria's world. We tend to keep

distant from us everything that does not allow coherence but it is in the incoherence that the story needs to find nourishment.

In The Lost Daughter, repulsion is a recurrent word. Insects, crickets, lizard and, worms emphasize nausea. What is this repulsion?

For Leda, it is everything that reminds us of our animal nature. The relationship we have with the non human living matter is contradictory. We are afraid of animals, we repel them, they remind us – as pregnancy that immediately modifies us bringing us closer to our animal nature – of the instability of the forms life can take. But then, more than men, we admit them in our words, we take care of them as babies, erasing fear and disgust with love. In these days I have been trying to tell a short story in which at the centre there is the female repulsion-attraction for the animal world and so for the animal nature in our own bodies. I would like to narrate how, for love, a woman gets closer to the repulsion of the flesh, to those areas where the mediation of words becomes weak, where the language becomes reticent and leaves a space between obscenity and the scientific terminology and in which everything can happen.

Leda tells Nina that since her adolescence the world has "become nastier towards women."

I believe that the urge for equality has pushed us to compete with men but also among us, multiplying the ferocity in the relationship between woman-man and woman-woman. The sexual difference, repressed in name of a masked equality, runs the risk of being inserted in old rules again, or cancelled by us for opportunism. In other words, the patriarch society - and I say that with anger – seems even much alive to me. It keeps the planet solidly in its hands and every time it can, it rages, more than once, against women

to make them "cannon fodder." This does not mean that the truths we have revealed have not brought any change. But I write novels and every time that words arrange things with a nice coherence, I don't trust it and I keep an eye on things that ignore the truth of words and don't care. I believe that we are in the middle of a very harsh fight and everyday we run the risk of loosing everything, even the syntax of truth.

Your female protagonists move along dangerous road; they break into fragments to find a more coherent unity in which they learn to cohabit with their ghosts: it seems the path of a successful therapy.

I have never been in therapy but I know what "*frantumarsi*"[feeling broken] means. I have observed it in my mother, in me, in many women. The process of fragmentation interests me from a narrative point of view. For me it means to tell, today, of a female "I" that suddenly feels itself in deconstruction, it loses the sense of time, it does not feel to be in order any more, it feels like a vortex of detritus, a whirlwind of thoughts-words. It stops abruptly and starts again from a new balance which is not necessarily more advanced then the previous and not even a stable one. It serves only to say: "now I am here and I feel like that."

Do you believe that this journey of passion, this getting rid of a personal "frantumaglia" to rebuild oneself again is an unavoidable passage for all women?

This happed in women I have been very close to. In some cases, it seems to me that this feeling of fragmentation could be attributed to that sort of original fragmentation that comes when you are born or when you create life. I mean that feeling that mothers feel when they 'expel' a living fragment from their body; or that feeling daughters feel when they are fragments of a whole and unique body. Leda is the fruit of this suggestion.

In your writing it is as if the ghosts and the flesh - whatever happens, what could happen if memories were on the same level - had the same density as reality. Is this a female writing?

I don't know. Certainly, in my experience the word is always "carnal." The moment I write with major pleasure is when I feel that the story does not need preambles and not even a perspective. It is there, I see it and I feel it, it is a world of living matter, of breath, of hot and cold. When I write, I am almost led by my own fingers on the computer keyboard and, at the same time, I am within that world and I let it bring me along its liquid vortex that pulls everything. With the passing of the years I feel closer to the idea that real writing is what is born from the self, from an ecstatic condition. One often imagines ecstasy as a disincarnating process. The ecstasy of writing is not to feel the breath of the word that rescues you from the flesh, but the flesh that does everything with the breath of the words.

Among the identities that people have attributed to you a good majority is male: do you recognize something not-female in your writing?

I think I have learned to write devouring especially men writing, redoing it all over again. It took me time to learn to love women who wrote. I must admit that the female nature in men attracted me more than the women's female nature. Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, they are real women. It is possible that it still lives in traits of my writing, but I don't believe that is the problem.

You said that your frenzy to tell has nourished itself also from the "shallow waters" as in the photo stories. What have you found in them?

The pleasure of attracting readers. The photo-story magazine was one of my first pleasures as a young reader. I believe that the obsession of obtaining a very tense story comes from there. I don't feel any pleasure to write if I don't feel that the page is an emotional pleasure. Once, I used to have great literary ambitions and I was ashamed of this impulse towards techniques of popular novels. Today, I am happy if somebody tells me that I have written an appealing novel, for example, Delly's.

Women who read your work often talk of an irresistible reading but also a "disturbing" one.

I think it depends on the fact that, when I write, it is as if I "slaughtered eels." I care little for the unpleasantness of the operation and I use the plot and the characters, as a tight web to pull everything that is alive and moves from the bottom of my experience, included what I have distanced as far as possible from me as it seemed unbearable for me. In the first drafts there is always more than I decide to publish. It is my own annoyance to censure myself. I feel, however, that in doing so I don't do right and I often reinsert what I have eliminated. Or I wait for the occasion to use the excluded paragraphs somewhere else.

Second article

In the article published in Repubblica on December 4h 2006, Ferrante answers Francesco Erbani's questions on the publication of *The Lost Daughter*. The present article, as the previous one, plays an important role for the present analysis as it confirms some traits about the author, especially on the matter of anonymity. The journalist introduces the artist as a literary case of the century and describes Ferrante as a woman who has decided to avoid public for fear of overlapping fiction and reality.

How are you?

An interview that starts with "how are you" is a little threatening. What would you like me to say? If I start digging in the "how" I will never stop. So, I answer: fine, I think, and I hope you are fine, too.

After many years, are you still convinced to remain in the shadow?

"Remain in the shadow" is an expression that I don't like. It sounds like a conspiracy, or of mercenaries. Let's say that, fifteen years ago, I preferred to publish books without feeling obliged to behave as a writer. I have not regretted that yet. I write and publish only when the book seems of a certain dignity to me and my editors. After that, the book follows its own path and I start doing something else. Everything is here and I don't see why I should change my behavior.

How do you consider the questions about your identity, are you pleased with them, annoyed or something else?

All these questions are legitimate, but reductive. For those who love reading, the author is a pure name. We don't know anything about Shakespeare. We love Homeric poems even if we ignore everything about Homer. And Flaubert, Tolstoj or Joyce become relevant if a talented person changes them into a story, a biography, a brilliant essay, a film and a musical. For the rest, they are last names, in other words, labels. Who do you think is interested in my small personal story if we can do without Homer's and Shakespeare's? A person who really loves literature is like a person of faith. The believer knows well that there is nothing in the register of births about the Jesus he trusts.

What is the identity that intrigues you the most among those suggested: Starnone, Fofi, Ramondino?

None, it seems to me a banal game of the media. One takes a name of no importance like mine, and joins it to major names. The contrary never happens. No paper would think of filling a page with the hypothesis that my books have been written by an old retired archivist or by a newly hired young banker. What should I tell you? I am sorry that people I admire are annoyed.

When people talk about your novels the issue about your identity often dominates the literary matters: does this bother you? How do you think you can avoid it?

Yes, it does bother me. But it also seems to me to be an example that literature *per sé* is not important for the media. Let's take your two questions: I have printed a book, but you, even knowing I would have answered in very general terms, concentrated your interview on the theme of my identity. So far, there is nothing that slightly concerns *The Lost Daughter*, its matter or its writing. You ask me how I think of avoiding that people talk only about who I am, neglecting my books. I don't know. You certainly, and I apologize for that, are not doing anything to change the situation.

Is there an element of enjoyment in the mystery Ferrante, what is funny for you?

You see? What do I have to tell you? There is only this that is funny: try to show readers what is the journalistic hierarchy and that mysteries count, especially those that are irrelevant, and not the reading itself.

How would you answer to those who insinuate that the mystery Ferrante contributes to rise the selling of your books?

I answer that is a stupid thing. Cinema contributed to the rising selling of my books. The mystery of Ferrante is an annoyance for real readers. Those who read novels

only wish for an appealing and dense story to nourish with scattered passages from their own experience.

You said that you did not want to appear in public to avoid entering the media circus that envelops the writers. Don't you believe that one can appear and at the same time disappear even from the most spectacular, gaudy and promotional aspects of the media circus?

Of course. But there is a misunderstanding: for me the problem is not to appear and than disappear, I am anything but shy. For me the problem is not to appear at all. Why should people be surprised? There is a big quantity of anonymous or named books that live, survive or have long been dead without a person ever claiming them. I love those books and those readers who say: I don't mind who has written them.

Is one of the other reasons of your privacy still valid, in other words the presence in your novels of autobiographical parts variously combined and masked, but yet recognizable?

Yes, it is. As anybody who writes, I work on facts, feelings, emotions that belong to me very intimately. But the problem has changed with time. Today especially I want to keep the liberty to dig deeply, without censorship in my stories.

Your three novels seem like three moments mixed into a single one, three variations on some topics among which there is the relationship between mother-daughter, a topic that is differently represented in the three novels but that it is central in all three. Is it a wrong impression?

No, not at all. I have written other books that eventually I have not published exactly because they appear as being scarcely mine. The three novels I have published belong to me; I feel them as steps of a single search.

In The Lost Daughter there is a family that looks like a "camorrista" family. Is it really like that?

Yes, it is. Even if I tend to tell behaviors in which any inhabitants of Campania could always identify. When I was young I knew a "napoletanità" that was not of the "Camorra" but was always close to it. I have felt all around me the natural passage [into a "camorristic behavior] as if the jump into the criminal step were prepared by misery but also by the loss of temporary comforts and by the cultural normality.

How do you live with the attention that has been focused on Naples for few weeks? Is it, according to you, an exaggeration by the media or is it that the city has registered an increased criminal pressure?

It is an exaggeration by the media. Naples should have had the spotlights always on it for decades. It has a long story of degrade, it is a metropolis that has anticipated and anticipates the Italian misdeeds, maybe the European ones. That is why it should never have been lost from sight. But the media survive on the exceptional: the killed, the garbage that is not removed, Saviano's beautiful book. The normality of the daily survival does not make the news. That's why when the exceptional goes away, everybody stays quiet and everything keeps becoming gangrenous.

You once said that Naples, gives you a lot of anxiety. A violent city, of sudden quarrels, blows, a vulgar Naples, where there are people ready for small crimes, and who are noisy, loud, boastful. Does it still give you this impression?

Yes, but nothing has changed, except the fact that what seemed to me to be specific for its historical characteristics of the city and of my region, now seems that it is spreading to the rest of Italy.

You have escaped from this Naples as soon as you could, nevertheless you have carried it as "a surrogate to always keep in mind that the power of life is damaged, humiliated by the unfair ways of life." *Have you ever returned there? Would you go back and live there?*

I seldom go back there. I don't know if I would live there again. I would do it if I was convinced that the change is not a rhetorical trick of charlatans, but a real political and cultural revolution.

The following article appeared on the New York Times on January, 15, 2008

Our Fetid City [88]

By ELENA FERRANTE
Naples, Italy

At night the mice and the dogs are masters. The garbage is piled up to the second floor of the houses, and in the darkness it comes alive. Plastic bags and sacks vibrate, emitting the sounds of things pulled apart, scavenged. By day the rats disappear, the dogs are quiet, and men, women, children reappear. The traffic, normally chaotic, here and there is stopped by overturned garbage cans and the trash that blocks the streets. The garbage — thousands of tons of it — has gone uncollected for three weeks, because all

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[88] This article was translated by Ann Goldstein from the Italian.

the available landfills are full. The evil odor of decomposition and burning waste moves down the hills of refuse and slides along the streets, enters shops, doorways, houses. But this city, a million people, keeps going. What makes people angry is not the inhabitants of the suburb of Pianura heatedly protesting the reopening of a garbage dump near their houses, but the more general acquiescence of Naples, the habit of surviving in inefficiency and disorder. Crime, in this city, has become a destiny; it has the power of things that are well known but about which there is nothing to be done. The garbage in the streets is nothing new; it has decades of history behind it. That organized crime controls the garbage industry and runs a staggering number of illegal dumps, everyone has known for a long time. That a wide range of poisons are buried in Campania, the region around Naples, and that this multiplies by the hundreds the usual risks that human life is exposed to, is known to both ordinary citizens and government officials. That illegality flourishes, and very profitably, under the umbrella of the law thanks to the intervention of politicians of every stripe is not even arguable — it's a fact, something that's been happening forever. Take Antonio Bassolino, the former mayor of Naples and now governor of Campania. That even an honest man like him, coming from the least corrupt political tradition in Italy, couldn't change anything that really matters, and in fact was slowly swallowed up by the most complicitous inefficiency, is for the Neapolitan (and not only the Neapolitan) the ultimate proof that in Naples there is nothing to be done, that there remains only the quiet impotence of those who manage to get by in the rot. This deep feeling makes Prime Minister Romano Prodi's efforts to clean up the mess absurd. A Neapolitan I know laughs, saying to me: "What's he doing — sending in the army, declaring a curfew, naming a special commissioner. To do what,

bludgeon, lock up, torture? Only a fool would believe that what has not been done for decades can be done in the space of a few days." No one laughs, on the other hand, when rumors run through the city that in the neighborhoods controlled by the Camorra mob there's no trash in the streets; it's in the neighborhoods that are home to respectable people, people who don't protest and don't shoot, that the garbage reaches the second floor. Nonsense, of course. But nonsense that bears witness to the definitive loss of trust in institutions. A resigned loss, by people who no longer believe even in the cleanliness of other places in the world. In Naples the mountains of garbage seem the symbol of a cosmic rot. Here the rot is not only visible; it has the power of portent. If you know how to look, it's easy to understand that this stinking, polluted filth, generator of profits both legal and illegal, is not some ancient relic but very modern, and that it underlines the precariousness of every sort of order, in every part of the planet.

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La Frantumaglia

By Elena Ferrante

Translation by Elda Buonanno

1.The *Befana'*s[89] gift

Dear Sandra,[90]

You asked me, during the latest pleasant get-together with you and your husband, what I intend to do for the promotion of *Troubling Love* (it's best that I get used to calling the book by its final title). You asked the question in an ironic way, along with one of your amused looks. At that moment, I didn't have the courage to answer you; I thought I had already been clear enough with Sandro, who absolutely agreed with my decision, and I hoped we would not return to the subject, not even as a joke. Now I answer you in writing; writing erases my long pauses, uncertainties and weakness.

I do not intend to do anything for *Troubling Love,* nothing that requires my public exposure. I have already done enough for this long story: I wrote it. If the book is worth anything, this should suffice. I will not participate in debates and conferences if they invite me. I will not collect awards if they want to give me any. I will never promote the book, especially on television, in Italy or possibly abroad. I will participate only through my writing, but I would also like to keep this to a minimum. I made a definite promise to myself and to my family. I hope I will not be pressured into changing my mind. I understand that this may cause the publishing house some difficulties. I have great respect for your work, I have felt immediate affection for you and I do not want to harm you. If you don't intend to support me in this, please say it right away and I will understand; it is not necessary at all that I publish this book.

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[89] Translator's note: Befana is a character in Italian folklore who, according to legend, brings children their presents on January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany.
[90] Translator's note: Sandra Ozzola is Ferrante's editor at Edizioni e/o.

As you know, the reasons for this decision are difficult for me to explain. I only wish to confess to you that I made a little bet with myself and with my own convictions. I believe that books, once they are written, have no need for their authors. If they have anything to say, sooner or later they will find their readers; otherwise, they won't. There are enough examples out there: I really love those mysterious books of ancient and modern times that have no known authors yet that had and still have intense lives of their own. They seem to me a sort of nocturnal magic, just like the gifts from the Befana that I expected as a kid: I would go to bed extremely shaken and the following morning I would wake up and the gifts would be there -- but nobody had seen the *Befana*. The true miracles are those no one will ever be able to ascribe to anyone, be they the tiny miracles of secret spirits hidden in the house or the big miracles that truly leave us speechless. I am still left with this childish longing for wonders big and small. I still believe in them.

Therefore, my dear Sandra, let me tell you this very clearly. If *Troubling Love* cannot weave its own narrative by itself, well, this means that you and I were wrong. If, instead, it does, then this narrative thread will weave itself as long as it can and we will only need to thank readers for their patient ability to grasp it from one side and pull it.

After all, isn't it true that advertisements are costly? I would be the least expensive author of your publishing house. I would even spare you my presence.

A big hug,

Elena

NOTE[91]

Letter dated September 21, 1991. The titles and all the notes are by the editorial staff.

[91] Translator's note: this note and the others are the actual notes included in the book

2. The Mothers' Dressmakers

Dear Sandra,

This matter of the prize[92] is getting me very upset. I must say that what confounds me most is not that my book was awarded a prize, but that the prize is named after Elsa Morante. In order to write a few lines of thanks -- especially in respectful praise of an author whom I have loved greatly -- I searched through her books for passages adequate to the occasion. I discovered that anxiety plays tricks on you. I browsed through page after page without tracking down a single word that would suit me, when in fact I remembered some very clearly. It will be necessary to reflect on how and when words escape from books and the books end up appearing to be empty shrines.

What put the veil over my eyes? I was looking for a clearly female passage on the mother character, but the male voices devised by Morante obscured my vision. I knew very well that those passages were there, but to find them again I would have to recreate the impression of my first reading, when I could hear the male voices as female voices and feelings "*en travesti.*"[93] However, to get something like this, the worst thing you can do is reading under pressure to find a passage to cite. Books are complex organisms: the lines that have deeply shaken us are the most intense moments in the earthquake that, as readers, we have experienced through the text from its very first pages. You either find the fault line and make it your own, or else the words that seemed written for us can no longer be found; and if they can be found, they appear banal, even clichéd.

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[92] Translator's note: The Procida Prize-Elsa Morante's *Arturo's Island* is awarded to the best literary work of the year by a jury of writers and journalists.
[93] Translator's note: "disguised"

Eventually, I used the quotation you already know, the one I wanted to use as the epigraph to *Troubling Love*; but it is difficult to use as it seems obvious when you read it today: a simple ironic passage on the dematerialization of the maternal body at the hands of the southern man.[94] For this reason, in case you deem necessary to quote that passage to make the reading of my note of appreciation more comprehensible, I am rewriting the entire page. Morante loosely summarizes what her character Giuditta would tell her son, as a comment to the Sicilian attitude demonstrated by the young man to mark the end, after great humiliation, of the theatrical experience of his mother and her subsequent return to a less uncanny aspect.

"Giuditta grabbed his hand and covered it with kisses. In that moment (she told him later) he had taken a very Sicilian posture: that of those severe Sicilians, men of honor, always watchful that their sisters not go out at night alone, encourage admirers, and use lipstick. For these men, 'mother' means two things: old and holy. The proper color of the mothers' clothes is black or at most grey or brown. Their clothes are shapeless since no one, including their dressmakers, thinks that a mother might have a woman's body. Their age is a mystery of no importance, because, after all, their only age is 'old age.' A mother's shapeless old age has holy eyes that cry not for herself but for her children; it has holy lips that pray not for herself but for her children. And woe to those who take in vain, in front of those children, the holy name of their mothers! Heaven help them! It is a mortal offense!"[95]

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[94] Translator's note: "Uomo del sud" usually refers to men born in the south of Italy.
[95] Translator's note: this is a passage from Elsa Morante, *Scialle Andaluso* [*Andalusian Shawl*]. Torino: Einaudi 1985, 207-208,my translation.

This passage, I beg you, must be read without emphasis, in a normal voice, without trying to use the declamatory tones of bad stage actors. Whoever of you reads it will have to underline lightly the words "shapeless," "the mothers' dressmakers," "a woman's body," "mystery of no importance."

And finally, here is my letter for the award committee; I hope people will understand that Morante's words are not at all outdated.

I apologize again for the trouble that I cause you.

Elena

Dear President, Dear Jurors,

I have in mind so many words by Elsa Morante, whose books I really love. Before writing you, I went looking for a few of them to take hold of and for inspiration. I found few, where I thought they would be. Many were in hiding: even though I was not looking for them, I recognized others while leafing through the text, and they enchanted me more than those I was seeking. Words take unpredictable journeys in the minds of those who read them. Among other things, I was searching for words about the mother figure, who is so central in Morante's work, and I ransacked *The House of Liars*, *Arturo's Island*, *History,* and *Aracoeli.* Finally, I found some in *Andalusian Shawl,* and they were the ones I was seeking.

You certainly know them better than I do so it is pointless to transcribe them. They tell of how children imagine their mothers: in a perennial aged state, with holy eyes, with holy lips, with black or grey or at most brown clothes. At the beginning the author speaks of resolute sons: "those severe Sicilians, men of honor, always watchful of their

sisters." But in just a few lines, she puts Sicily aside and moves instead, I believe, to a less local maternal image. This happens with the appearance of the adjective "shapeless." The mothers' clothes are shapeless and their only age, old age, is also shapeless since, Elsa Morante says, "no one, including the mothers' dressmakers, thinks that a mother might have a woman's body."

That phrase "no one thinks" seems highly significant to me. It means that shapelessness is so powerful in conditioning the word "mother," that sons and daughters, thinking of the body to which that word ought to be connected, cannot do so without being repelled. Even the mothers' dressmakers cannot do this, although they are women, daughters, and mothers. Out of habit and without thinking, they cut dresses for mothers that erase the woman in them, as if being a woman were leprosy for the mother. They do it and thus the mothers' age is transformed into a mystery of no importance, and old age becomes their only age.

Only now, while I am writing, do I think consciously about those mothers' dressmakers. But they attract me a lot, especially if I link them with an expression that has made me curious since I was a girl. The expression is to "cut a dress on someone."[96] I imagined it hid a malignant meaning: a malicious aggression, a violence that ruins clothes and obscenely uncovers the body; or even worse a magic art able to mold the body to the point of obscenity. Today that meaning seems neither negative nor obscene. Actually I am fascinated by the connection between cutting, dressing and telling. It seems captivating to me that this connection produced a metaphor for evil gossiping. If the mothers' dressmakers learned how to cut the dresses over their bodies while stripping them naked or if they took in the dresses to restore the woman's body that they have and

[96] Translator's note: this expression could be roughly explained as "to have a suit(dress) tailored made"

that they have always had, in dressing them they would strip them: their body and their age would no longer be a mystery of no importance.

Maybe, when speaking of mothers and their dressmakers, Elsa Morante was also dealing with the need to find their real dresses and writing about the habits that load the word "mother." Or maybe not. Anyway, I do remember other images of hers (the recollection of a "motherly shroud," for example, defined as "a cloth of fresh love on the body of leprosy") in which it would be nice to abandon oneself and rise again as new dressmakers ready to combat the error of Shapelessness.

NOTE

The author did not collect the prize-First Work awarded to *Troubling Love* by the jury of the 'Procida Prize, Elsa Morante's *Arturo's Island*.' Instead she sent the publishing house this letter to the jurors, which was read during the award ceremony. The letter was published in *Cahiers Elsa Morante* edited by Jean-Noël Schifano and Tjuna Notarbartolo, "Edizioni scientifiche 1993" and it is here reprinted with slight changes. The quoted passage by Elsa Morante can be found in *Scialle Andaluso* [*Andalusian Shawl*], Einaudi 1985, 207-208.

3. Writing on demand

Dear Sandra,

What a terrible thing you have done to me: while writing willingly for the anniversary of your publishing enterprise, I discovered that the challenge of writing on demand is a downhill struggle -- one does it easily and in fact with pleasure. What will happen next? You made me pull the plug so will the water go down the drain? At this moment I feel ready to write about anything. Will you ask me to celebrate the purchase of your new car? I will fish up some place the memory of my first car trip and line after line I will end up congratulating you for your new car. Will you ask me to congratulate you for the kittens that your cat has delivered? I will revive the cat my father first gave me and then, exasperated by the mewing, took back, abandoning her along the road to Secondigliano.[97]

Will you ask me to write a contribution to one of your books on modern Naples? I'll start from the moment I didn't want to leave my house, out of fear of meeting an intrusive neighbor my mother had argued with and kicked out of the house. And I'll pull out, word after word, the fear of violence that bounces back to us today, while old politics retouches its makeup and new politics, which we ought to be supporting, can't be found anywhere. Will I have to pay duties to the female need of learning to love one's mother? I'll tell how my mother held my hand tight on the street when I was little. I'll start from there -- actually, thinking about it, I would really like to do it, I cherish a distant feeling of skin against skin. She would squeeze my hand, afraid that I'd escape and run along the dangerous broken road; I would feel her fear and I was afraid -- and so I will find a

[97] Translator's note: Secondigliano is a small city close to Naples

way of completing my little task to the point of artfully quoting Luce Irigaray and Luisa Muraro. Words carry along other words; it's always possible to write a page of banal, elegant, heartfelt and entertaining[98] coherence on any topic, high or low, simple or complex, flimsy or solid.

So what should we do then? Should we say no even to those we love and trust? That's not my case. I wrote the commemorative lines. I try to communicate to you a real feeling of respect for the noble struggle you've fought all these years and which today I believe is even more difficult to win.

So here's my message to you: Congratulations. This time I'm happy to move on to a bunch of capers.[99] After that, I don't know. I could inundate you with memories, little thoughts or broad sketches. It is no big deal. I feel I could write on demand about modern teenagers, trash on TV, about Di Giacomo, Francesco Iovine,[100] the art of yawning, or an ashtray. Chekhov, the great Chekhov, chatting with a journalist who wanted to know how he created his stories, took the first object at hand – an ashtray – and said to him: "You see this? Come back tomorrow and I will give you a short story entitled *The Ashtray*." Fantastic anecdote. But how and when is circumstance transformed into the need to write? I don't know. I only know that writing has a depressing side, when the nerves of the moment are exposed. Then even truth can appear artificial. That's why, to avoid any misunderstandings, let me add as a side comment, without capers or literature, that my congratulations are real and heart-felt.

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[98] Translator's note: "banal" appears the suitable choice to be consistent with Ferrante's use of contrasting adjectives in Italian [una pagina di qualche banale elegante accorata divertita coerenza]

[99] Translator's note: the phrase would literally translates "tuft" or "mound of capers," however, the translator has preferred "bunch" because the meaning is closer to the metaphoric image Ferrante gives in the paragraph below.

[100] Translator's note: Salvatore Di Giacomo and Francesco Iovine are two Italian modern writers.

See you soon,

Elena

In one of the many houses where I lived as a girl, a bunch of capers grew every season on the wall facing east. It was bare stone, badly joined, where a seed could hardly find a place. But that caper, more than anything else, grew and flourished so superbly, and, at the same time, with such delicate colors, that I still have in mind an image of real vigor, of calm energy. The country fellow who rented us the house cut the plant down every year, but in vain. When he plastered the wall, he spread a uniform layer with his own hands and then painted it an intolerable pale blue. I waited a long time, trustful that the caper roots might win and suddenly crease the flat calm of the wall.

Today, as I look for the right way to congratulate my publishing house, I heard that it happened. The plaster cracked the wall and the caper again broke through with its first buds. So I wish *e/o* to keep fighting against the plaster, against all that creates harmony through erasure. You do it by stubbornly springing forth, season after season, books like caper blossoms.

NOTE

The occasion cited earlier is the XV Anniversary of *edizioni e/o* (1994). The passage above was included in the catalogue published for the above-mentioned special event.

4. The Film Script

Dear Sandro,[101]

I am obviously curious and I can't wait to read Martone's[102] screenplay: please send it to me as soon as you receive it. I am afraid, however, that reading it can only serve my curiosity: to understand what my book has nourished and is still nourishing in Martone's film project, which of his nerves my text has hit, and how it has stirred his creative juices. For the rest, if I think about it, I expect that I will find myself in a rather funny and embarrassing situation: I will become the reader of another author's text, which will tell me a story that I wrote. I will imagine, with his words, what I have already imagined, seen and fixed with my own words. And this second imagination will come to terms, like it or not, – ironically? or tragically? – with the first. I will thus be the reader of one of my readers who will tell me, in his own way, with his own means, with his intelligence and sensitiveness, what he read inside my book. How I will take it, I cannot tell. I am afraid to find out that I know little about my own book. I am afraid to see in somebody else's writing what I have in fact told. (A screenplay is professional writing, after all, but at the same time writing that tells a story.) And I fear being disgusted by it, or discovering its weaknesses, or simply realizing what it is missing: what I should have told but have not due to my inability or shyness, my self-imposed literary choices, my superficiality.

But enough, I do not want to drag this out. I must admit that the pleasure of a new experience prevails over little anxieties and preoccupations. I believe I will proceed

[101] Translator's note: Sandro Ferri is Ferrante's editor at Edizioni e/o.
[102]Translator's note: Mario Martone is an Italian film director

this way: I will read Martone's text, leaving aside the fact that it is an intermediate step towards his film. I will read it as an opportunity to delve into another person's imagination, not as my book that now has a life of its own, but as matter that my writing has barely touched. Tell him then, if you see him or are in touch with him, that I don't want him to expect an effective technical contribution. I thank you very much for all the trouble you are taking.

NOTE

The letter is dated April 1994 and refers to the screenplay that Mario Martone adapted from the novel *Troubling Love*. The director sent the screenplay to Ferrante with an accompanying letter. This was followed by an exchange of letters published in the original book.

5. The reinvention of *Troubling Love*

Exchange with Mario Martone

Campagnano, 18 April 1994

Dear Mrs Ferrante,

This is the third draft of the screenplay I am working on. As you can imagine, there will be others that will present alterations, new ideas, changes connected to the developments of the characters or the choice of the settings. A screenplay, in fact, is almost a map: the more it is detailed, the freer is the journey that begins with the filming. Till that moment, you never finish working on it.

I have tried to understand and respect the book and, at the same time, to filter it with my own experiences, my memories and my perception of Naples. I am trying to give life to the character Delia which may be different than the one you know: it is necessary because in the novel you have tried to hide it. You disclose the thought, give the reader some decisive clues, but you never describe her before our eyes with the evidence of the other characters. This amazing procedure of writing that creates the relationship between Delia and Amalia, will eventually and necessarily need to end for me,so that I hope to reconnect on the screen: as since the beginning, we have always seen Delia. I am trying to give Delia a personality that is at the crossroads between the protagonist of your novel and the actress in the film, Anna Bonaiuto, according to a procedure I cherish (if you had time to see the film, think about the character of Renato

Caccioppoli and the actor Carlo Cecchi in *Morte di un matematico napoletano*). It is a way to adhere to the cinematic concreteness to the novel: we don't need to forget that the film camera will film that face, that body and that gaze.

The flash-backs, as the voice-off, are maybe too many, but you must consider that it is some material that may be mounted later with a certain freedom and that now I believe it is better to keep. I have changed certain settings; you will see in particular I have changed the hotel room with a spa. These changes and other that will occur are mainly due to the fact that I will try to find real places that will be closer to the spirit of the novel and not to recreate the settings. Second; because sometimes (as in the case of the hotel room) to see on the screen is inevitably different than to see with the imagination. For this same reason, I prefer, for example, that uncle Filippo has both his arms: I am afraid that the spectator will otherwise wonder where the trick is.

I would like to have your opinion about the period during which the film occurs and the electoral climate that I have put in the background: I would not want that it appeared forced. I will send you a copy of the article which appeared on the *Manifesto* that seems to capture the relationship well between Alessandra Mussolini's femininity and fascism as an anthropological datum in Naples: a relationship that I think is not too unknown to *Troubling Love*.

Please do not hesitate, if you wish, to give me indications and suggestions, in detail: they will be absolutely precious to me. I really hope that the screenplay will not disappoint you: I would be happier to face the screening of the film counting on your trust.

I send you my regards with affectation and gratitude. Mario Martone

Dear Martone,

Your screenplay has so excited me that even though I tried to write you, I have not been able to proceed beyond the first lines of appreciation and admiration for your work. I am afraid I don't know how I could contribute to your project. For this reason, I have decided to do this: I will indicate below, slowly and with a certain embarrassment, the main points, sometimes not relevant at all, on which you could intervene. I will do that the same way I have jotted them down while I was reading and without too many claims. Many notations will appear groundless, due more to the fact of how the event and the protagonists have remained in my mind than how they now appear in writing. Furthermore, they do not consider your effort to reinvent Delia in a cinematic pattern. I ask for your forgiveness in advance.

P.10 The mention about Augusto: Delia is a very tense person in each muscle and word: nice and cold, affectionate and distant. Her relationships with men are not experiences but experiments to test a tight organism: all these are failed experiments. I believe she can not enjoy any solitude. Solitude for her is not a parenthesis, a holiday in a busy life: it is a closure transformed into a way of living. Each of her gestures or words is a knot that the event will undo. I don't think it is useful to mention a normal life made of common sentences and feelings. If there were Augusto, Delia would not talk about him. In short, I would cancel this name and the mention to solitude, and "let's talk about things," as well.

P.14 Maria Rosaria's line seems exaggerated. I would replace it with another line, able to give an immediate sign of her father's jealousy. I take this opportunity to tell

you that it would be better to clarify that her father has always been jealous. It is in fact from this paternal jealousy that Delia has built up the image of her evil mother. Since her adolescence, she was sure that Amalia had delivered her only to project her outside herself, separate from her and devote herself immoderately to others. This Amalia's ghost, not the real Amalia, is the crossroad between the paternal obsessions and the feeling of abandonment felt by Delia when as a young girl (expect in the closet, in the first pages).

P.16-17 Maria Rosaria's second line and Wanda's following one seem to me scarcely motivated. They say what the three sisters already know. They are arranged as rhetorical questions, maybe useful to the spectator but not to the characters. Furthermore, could Maria Rosaria's tone be the antithesis with what she is saying about her husband and herself? If the theme is the break from Naples and their family events, maybe it is necessary that the three sisters would face it with this in mind and that will reveal to them something about them.

P.18 The body of the old sewing machines and its exploration by the young girl could introduce her mother's outwork, the clothes' theme (entering into what she imagines are her mother's dresses and what that will reveal for her), the wound on her finger. (Sewing machine, needle, chalk, fingertip, needle pillow, and gloves, fabric and clothes) these are signs that recall how Amalia hid or accentuated her disobedient body to be punished. But I wish to underline that Amalia's work reflects the fight during the Forties and the Fifties, in certain classes, to pass from the pure survival to a more well-off state (the blue suit, Caserta's beige coat were in Delia's eyes, the proof of her mother's other life, a secret life). At the basis of *Troubling Love*'s event there is the huge waste of

energy to pass from a state of precarious underclass to the symbols of a wealthier middleclass. We should imagine that Nicola Polledro's murky business has added to hiding the father's pastry shop in the suburb; that Nicola Polledro has had an economic prosperous phase using Delia's father art period. He had then slowly plunged into a small illegal business, to survive, as an old man, along his son's illegal and "camorra - style" activities. We should imagine that Delia's father had at the beginning a certain rude talent – maybe the Vossi Sisters' painting is really his– changed first by the need to manage and then to be at the same level of Caserta (the wealthy Caserta's showing off made him envious and evil). We should imagine that this effort to change status has raised in him tensions and violence mixed with jealousy, sexual terrors, vengeances for the deviated talent, for the immediate exploitation. These workings appear to be a man's thing to Delia. But those moments are important when she realizes for the first time that her mother's work made money for the family; that her mother's body was the nude model from which the "Gypsy's" image has derived; that the break between Caserta and the father (and Amalia's intervention) occurred for the economic use of the body's image.

P.19 Why put the voice off here that prepares the episode in the elevator? Would it be better to see Amalia that on the landing calls Delia, and then return to the episode?

P.33 Delia's first line seems groundless to me. Besides, in my mind, her father's jealous violence has always been there. At this point, simply, his reasons for jealousy become more complex and the fury rises.

P. 34 The character of Nicola Polledro's father, Antonio's father, seems not too present for me (but maybe I am wrong). On the other side, it must be indicated with clarity for the role that it has. Caserta does not sell the bar, but encourages the father -

the pastry cook- to sell it. The old man must be imagined to be "put to work" by Nicola who, in the mean time, lives a wealthy life.

P.38 The theme of the painting could be enriched, beyond my book: it is the only moment in which Delia's father can effectively swing between boastfulness and betrayed talent.

P.53 I don't mind the change of setting (the spa instead of the hotel). As I have already told you, I am afraid that we will lose one feature in Delia's character: her body is blocked in a sort of programmatic reverse of the sexually dense figure that she has given to her mother. The scene communicates the chaos in Delia's body between repulsion and desire, together with her suffering humanity, or it runs the risk of being a sexual offering paid to the spectator.

P.68. I would erase that "look, look, look." It does not seem like Delia's tone.

P.69. I insist that the painting theme would maybe need a new trait. The theme of the research for an economic, social and cultural emancipation through the mythic transformation of the art could be the father's "positive" trait who has a socially disadvantaged talent, not cultivated but ambitious. But I don't think it is necessary to add that maybe it needs only to be visualized, when you will work with the actor who will play that character.

P.74 Delia's line is difficult. It must not be thought of as a discovery (it is a discovery for the spectator, but not for her) but as an effort to tell a known truth to herself that only in that moment does it become a word.

Lastly, I don't mind using an electoral setting, as long as it stays as a background, a distant and particular sound but not essential.

I hope you will forgive me. I barely know anything about a screenplay, I probably have clumsily jotted down things that you already know, that were already present in your work, or that have barely something to do with a tale through images. In this case, throw everything away and keep only my admiration for your research and for your work. About my book, what I care about and what flatters me is that you have nourished yourself to ignite your imagination and creativity, that belongs entirely to you.

Sincerely,

Elena Ferrante

Dear Martone,

I like this last draft even more then the previous one, but it is difficult for me to explain to you with clarity why. I know only that I have been able to read your text with such intensity and participation that my text denies me. The more you reinvent *Troubling Love*, the more I find it again, I see it, I feel what it brings with itself. It is a feeling on which I have to ponder. For the moment, I am happy with the result, for you and for me.

I have nothing to object about placing Delia in Bologna. Rome has no role in the event: it probably gave Delia a more anonymous location, as a single woman, with a small talent that she needs to survive, severe with herself and the others enough to protect her delicate balance, but she is fragile and anxious, infantile in a certain way, when her mother's visits force her to regress toward her native town. Bologna instead, as far as I know, suggests something more "artistic" and "alternative" that, at least in my intentions, is not present in the character. But this is fine if you think that this city will be more useful for you for the building of the working background of the character and for her likelihood.

I am fascinated more by the fact that you have decided to place Amalia's house in one of the buildings in the Gallery. Those are buildings I know. I believe it is a good choice, made more promising by your insight about the story and for the anthropological changes of that space. I had thought of a narrow street in a less important area. But I liked the image of Delia looking out of the window above in the Gallery feeling overwhelmed by the echo of those voices speaking in dialect.

I like also the changes you made at the night scene in the building, I assume due to the choice of the place, even if I was closed to Delia's movement from the top to the bottom (her shelter as an adolescent is on the top, that in my mind, perhaps mechanically, was opposite to the bottom of the basement of infancy: in that shelter, Delia brought her mother and Caserta should go up there: but both of the encounters fail and Delia is obliged to go down toward the bottom, a shift present in the whole story texture and I think, that you have synthesized highlighting the passage from the centre to the periphery. But these are small details: the scene as it is now seems very tense, detailed and effective).

To me, there still is the problem of the encounter with the mother in the elevator. This is an important moment during which the mother-daughter relationship clearly falls, for the first time, in jealousy and in an embarrassing bodily awareness (embarrassment in the book, embodied into a single gesture: Delia removes her hand from her mother's, puts it on her heart, then opens the door and asks her mother to leave). I believe that this is one of those cases in which the narrating voice, anticipating Delia's jealous question, smoothens the scene and confuses ideas instead of clarifying them. I don't know which

solution we can find to avoid the spectator seeing it not as a memory but as a vision: you have solved many problems and you will solve this one, too.

Talking about the off voice, I am convinced now, reading this last draft and admiring its results, that the first person narration must have been an annoying cage for you (a first person when it is there, struggles to become a third). However, you succeeded very creatively, by empowering the young Delia's gaze, by inventing the glasses mechanism. I would like so, besides the difficulties connected to the scene in the elevator, to encourage you to do the last effort and erase totally, or almost totally, the narrating voice.

In my book, it is the voice of Delia who is already out of the story; it does not belong to the woman who lives her days in Naples, but rather to that woman who has gone out those days, changed, and now, again far from Naples, she can tell the internal and external changes she has undergone. You, instead, have succeeded in building up a Delia (as it has happened) whom it is possible to see "inside" and "outside", exactly when the move occurred (the very beautiful end of the film is the proof of your great result), does not need a posteriori synthesis. That is why, the fragments of a narrating voice that have been left in your text seem to be superficial to me and, in a certain way, in opposition with their origin. Born as traces of a voice that tells when everything is over, they can not work as "current thoughts" of a third person who doesn't know yet what will happen to her – the person we see acting on the screen and who has already, among other things, a personal interior world effectively visualized in parallel.

Yes, indeed, if it is possible, erase what remains of the narrating voice: it should not be difficult for her, at this point. Maybe, if you can find anything better, you could keep only the incipit, but with no adjustments, by showing the literary texture.

I would like now to go to some reading notes. You had to completely occupy the verbal space left empty in my novel, with the dialect. You have done it with such naturalness to be, I believe, one of the elements that contribute to have me read your work with emotion. I imagine that also the background music, the non written statements, will contribute to create that dialect stream that Delia feels as a threatening song, a recall to the language of the obsessions, the violence of her infancy (in this sense, I like a lot that in scene 17, where you avoid connecting directly to Caserta the flow of obscene words, but you have it come from the sounds of the city; I have appreciated as well, the stress on the roar of voices in the lunch scene).

I am totally convinced, instead, that Delia tells Giovanna (scene 6) the sentence that is at the origin (and not only) of her verbal block. I tell you why, I believe it is wrong that Delia uses the dialect in the first scenes of the film, in an environment far, in all sense, from Naples, when, instead, her pronunciation and her sentences definitively translated in dialect should emerge as an instinctive reaction ("asshole" the troublesome young will yell), or as a grade of her getting closer to Amalia. But, above all, it seems wrong that we hear her say that sentence so soon. It has a story that we need to follow backwards: we will leave Amalia: we will hear a mysterious hint by uncle Filippo; we will clearly attribute it to Delia when she was young; we will know that she has heard it from the old Polledro; and only after we will understand who she has re-adopted it and we will hear her saying it in a freeing way by the adult Delia.

In other words, I am not convinced that the sentence is said by Delia at the beginning of the film (by the way, she would not do it; she would pass it, or would say some generic words, embarrassed and unable to tolerate the aggravation for the mother's obscenity. I tend to believe that the sentence should be clearly said by Amalia, being unbearable for Delia. The rest of the story will make us think that those words were perhaps said by Amalia in a state of anxiety and mental instability, as a dangerous song (there is Caserta with me, your father still wants to hurt me, etc.) or as an outburst of an old drunk lady or as a confused act of reconciliation.

In other words, for me, those words should be heard by the spectator with clarity and at the end of scene 5, among those almost whispered obscenities pronounced by Amalia on the phone; to pass soon after on Delia's lost expression: her first expression able to sign us to the interior richness and the acknowledgement of suffering. "Mom, who is with you?" could be said by Delia after Amalia's sentence, as a sort of sudden move in the memory.

On the sentence *per se*, I would carefully observe that (I do not have clear ideas on this) it is really unbearably obscene (and this one is not) or it suggests the obscene through a totally undefined nature. Her sentence looks like this: that's why I would suggest the erasure of that "under" that, as it gives a detail, and can lead the spectator to think that it suggests too little.

Still on this point, in sum, reading , I had the impression that, in the conclusion of scene 44, when Polledro gets up and goes out, we could already see the father and listen to the voice of the young Delia who says the sentence to the old Polledro as if Caserta had said it to Amalia. Then we could think that Delia says: "And if I am sick…", and

then link to scene 12. This is for clarity of the story, because I have felt the need to immediately know the use the young Delia has made of the old Caserta's words. But maybe I am wrong. I am writing hastily, without the necessary time to smoothen the senseless suggestions.

There is another topic that has raised some perplexity: the economic exploitation of the job of Delia's father. I would focus, to underline the business among the three men, on Caserta who, as it is said in the book, is in "business" with the Americans, but I would give more details. According to how you have built the incipit of the slap scene (another great solution), we know little about what the three men really do: uncle Filippo's exultant scream does not tell us much. If you develop the few lines in the book in which it is mentioned the "American portrait", uncle Filippo could, let's say, appear in scene 4 with some pictures and say something like this : "he has to do another four portraits. Caserta says that he needs them right away. I have brought the pictures" (I apologize for the ridiculous pseudo-dialectal tone). And we could see in details the pictures brought by uncle Filippo (there is some descriptive hints in the book), another on the edge of the tripod and in a corner the portrait that has just been done out of it, other ready portraits, mixed with paintings of sea storms and countryside landscapes. Delia could then say, on p. 31: "He was the one to trade with the American sailors in the gallery and asked them to show their family pictures and convinced them to have an oil- portrait of their mother, their girlfriend, or their mother. He exploited their nostalgia and had provided for us all, included you …" Caserta's business, at least as far as Delia's father is concerned, would consist in this case in contacting sailors and transform them into commissioners of oil portraits derived from pictures (their pictures, their girlfriends',

their distant mothers', etc.). The other mediator, Migliaro, would intervene later to rescue Delia's father from a possible dying market putting him into a totally different market, in expansion with the growth of the middle class in the Fifties.

I would suggest these things to you because I am afraid the weakest and most visible moment of your text is exactly the definition of Caserta's business and Delia's father's. If you mention this possible artistic business with the Americans, you will obtain texture (the pictures, the portraits scattered all over the room), that, I think, is missing for the moment in uncle Filippo's burst focusing (very effectively, and it should not be touched) on the gipsy woman.

I have nothing else to suggest to you if not small notes that I will list here for you with the number of each page. But please, I have already realized that I have exaggerated. I have found out that for my irrational idiosyncrasy, I have also erased that Delia's "isn't?" on page 5: "Your father is still in this police station, isn't?" Please, be merciful and erase that "isn't".

P.13 The dialogue between the sisters is working better but I would modify. First of all that Delia's "too much": it seems vague and melancholic, I would replace it with an approximate number (but there is the scene in which Delia has revealed to the mother about her refuge on the last floor, while in the elevator. When did it happen? Two years earlier? Three? Delia can answer with no contradictions "Already. Two or three years?"); or I would leave only the "already"; or I would replace it with "yes, many years."

Besides, Maria Rosaria's answer keeps bothering me: maybe I feel an inner danger in all the expressions being in dialect: the stereotype used when acting is with the

Neapolitan tone, moanful, sweety, trembling, overtone, with a overly shown sentimentality that doesn't communicate feelings. It is true that there is a communication in Neapolitan, in reality, that has those features (and in the text you can hear here and there some traces in uncle Filippo and in De Riso); but I would not worsen it in writing with the aggravating mimesis of the acting at theater , at cinema etc. I would make Maria Rosaria while trying to hold her emotion with a dry answer: "It was Mum who had to take the train and come to see you in Bologna," a sort of reproach: then the cry during which, annoyingly, Wanda intrudes .

P.25 In De Riso's words, at the bottom of the page: isn't it better for "this apartment," to replace "in gallery"?

P.28 I had in mind that in the old yellowed picture, shown after the identity card (that obviously Delia doesn't open) it would be nice that Amalia were there and that we could see her face well, her hairstyle. It is necessary that the spectator links a well defined photographic image of Amalia to the identity card, so as to surprise better when Delia, after the argument with Polledro, will check the identity card and find out that the identity card (old) has been modified. But, any other invention is good, as long as it allows us to see Amalia, in picture before her arrival on the scene with Polledro and the surprise of the identity card.

P.32 I feel something unnatural in these important words, but I don't know what. Maybe, it is that "half naked" that seems to me to be redundant, especially if the rest of the actress's tone and the expression will be the right ones. I thought also that maybe this is one of those moments in which Delia must speak a little in dialect, with calm, with no overtones, but as if, suddenly, she would hear those past voices. Something like: "I did

the right thing. He didn't want that gipsy to be copied in the street fairs," but I don't want to exaggerate: am I intruding too much in your job?

P. 54 I would like to say that it is very beautiful that erasure of a too powerful mother with the breathing on the glass; as it is even more beautiful than the fact that the mother and Caserta come back, older, while the glass is getting clear, among the people in the "mafia-electoral" style dining room.

I would erase that "Delia" from Polledro's words, at the bottom of the page. He addressed to her and that's it: he is thinking of his troubles, and doesn't want to establish a real contact with that particular person called Delia; it is for that that she makes an ironic remark in the following statements.

P.57 Polledro's words are not clear to me. Maybe it is better written: "You came to the shop. It wasn't me who was looking for you."

P.65 Shouldn't Delia dial a phone number at the end of page. 48? Isn't it confusing closing with a ringing and opening with a ringing?

P. 69 I would like that the father let it go more and said at the end of the page: "What did she think? She has loved me, or she has not loved me. She was a liar," etc.

For this character I would like, beside my book and almost to balance this scene that I feel awful about, a "good" previous moment. For example, at the end of page 4, the little girl could go to the father, then back to the tripod at the gipsy's portrait, or while he is beginning one of his ordered portraits. The father would put her on his knees, mainly distractedly, and she would not accept willingly that contact, he would ask: "what happened to you? Who made you cry? And she would wiggle out harshly "no one" and

he would go back painting. But I don't know if it is possible as there is already the great scene with the helpers.

P.71 the father's second words "she kissed" isn't it little? Isn't it better "she used to hang around with Caserta" and then Delia's words, these also must be harsher "Yes, it was a lie, but why did you believe a young girl? For you, a woman was a whore if only she said "Good morning" to another person. You didn't take long to believe me! Nothing! You believed me as I believed you when I saw that you hit and thought "Yes, do it, that means that she is really a whore?" Or something like that. Anyway, it is here that Delia could slide again into the dialect.

P.72 The father's third words: it is better to specify "I did it when I was twenty-five. I sold it," etc.

P.75 I don't like the expression "Look." From "where are you" you understand that Delia feels spied upon.

P.76 Delia's third words: I would erase "disgusting," it is a redundant comment, what we are seeing is already disgusting. I would add "I told my father" or, (according to me it would be better) "come here," etc, pronounced by Caserta senior and the adult Delia, after having repeated it to herself, could finally admit: "I told my father that Caserta did and instead said to Amalia what, that old man had said and done to me."

I have finished, I hope I have accurately done what you have required me to do. I think that these notes will arrive when you will have already started to shoot and won't be useful to you. That's fine. I was equally pleased to concentrate on your text and imagine what could have been useful for it: in certain moments, it was as if I retouched my own text. I was very happy for this involvement, that I didn't expect or that I pretended not to

expect because I was afraid of it. Please, don't look at the narcissism badly controlled, smudges of pride and immodest hazards.

With friendship and gratitude.

Elena Ferrante

Rome, 29 January 1995

Dear Elena,

The film is ready. Some parts are missing (sound montage and mixing, photographic correction of the final printing), but the copy that we are already now ready to show has, substantially, everything. *Troubling Love* will be in the theaters in April.

Last time that I wrote you, it was August, and we were a month away from the shooting: the following months have been so intense that it is difficult for me to try to tell you in a letter the mixture of emotions, and thoughts of this amazing and tiring period. I can only tell you how grateful I am to you for having given me the possibility of making this film, that I adore absolutely and regardless of the success it might have. I would be happy not to have betrayed your trust.

Your last letter was extremely precious to me. I have always kept it with me during the shooting, and it has helped me to face the darker areas strongly, besides helping to smoothen and improve the screenplay. Elena, would you like to come to Rome and see the film? I know your privacy and I don't want to violate your desire not to appear. Choose the time and the way, or, if you don't want, answer me negatively and I will understand. But you must know that Anna, everybody and myself have loved and respected you and have always thought of making the film with you.

I send you my regards and I hope to have your news soon.

Mario

Dear Mario,

Your invitation has complicated my life a lot. It is useless to tell you how much I would have liked to see the results of your work; it is something I care for in a very particular way. But in this phase, each day for me is a dare. I am working a lot on a new text: it is difficult for me to call it a novel. I don't know what it is and each morning I start writing anxiously and of not being able to go ahead. I know from experience, (a very bad experience) that any accident may weaken the impression of necessity in the pages I am writing: and when that impression fades away, with it the work of months goes away, and I cannot do anything but wait for another occasion.

Watching your film is, obviously, something more than an accident. Even if I had tried, in these months to think of it as an independent artistic operation in the substance not from *Troubling Love*, but from the feeling I keep of it, I doubt of being a nonchalant spectator. The idea I have about you, about the passion and the intelligence with which you have started this job, doesn't allow me making a joke of myself. I can foresee very well the effects of a work that, I assume, will come back to me with a longer energy than the one I needed for my book. In brief, I am sure that your film will affect me deeply and I will need to face myself again, what I have done till now and what I intend to do in the future. Thus, after these hesitations, I have decided to concentrate on my new text and try to finish it without risk of having interruptions that could be destructive.

I have decided it with pain. The desire to be invested by your film (I have had no doubt about its success since the moment I read the screenplay) is as strong as the desire to find a secure shelter. Obviously I won't last long and eventually I wont' find any appropriate protections. But I am sure that till then, you will understand not my privacy (I am not really discreet) but my fears. With love

Elena Ferrante

Note

The exchange Martone-Ferrante about *Troubling Love* screenplay has been published in *Linea d'ombra*, double number 106, July-August 1995.

6. Media Hierarchies

Dear Erbani,

Your letter struck me for its frank terseness, a gift possessed only by the writing of lucid people. If I were sure of being able to answer the questions you intend to ask me with equal transparency, I would say ok, let's do the interview. But I seek ideas running after words, and I need so many sentences – actual confused ramblings – to come to an answer. This doesn't mean that I would not like to chat a bit with you. Your letter, thanks to the clear presentation that distinguishes it, made me want to ask you a question in return. The question is the following: Why - even though you read my book a year ago, even having appreciated it as you said - did you decide to contact me just now, after learning that a movie will be made from *Troubling Love*?

If we were to do not an interview but a friendly conversation, I would especially discuss with you why it took you so long, and I would begin, for example, with an observation of yours. You write (less brutally than the way I summarize): your book tells me something but your name tells me nothing. Question: If my book had not told you anything but my name had, would it have taken less time to ask me for an interview?

Don't take this as a bitter comment, it's not. I take advantage of your writing without pretence to point out a problem that is very close to my heart. I want to ask you this: from the point of view of the media, is a book firstly the name of its author? Is the resonance of the author or better, the author as character staged through the media, a fundamental support for the book? Isn't it news worthy for the cultural pages that a good

book has been released? Instead, it's more news worthy that a famous person able to say something to the press has signed any book?

I believe that good news is always the same: a book worth reading has been released. I also think that actual readers do not care about the one who wrote it. I think that readers of a good book at most may wish that the author of a good book continues to write conscientiously, producing other good books. I think that even authors of the classics are just a bunch of dead letters, compared to the life that flares up all over their pages as soon as you begin to read them. That's all. To say it with a cliché, even Tolstoy is an insignificant shadow if he takes a stroll with Anna Karenina.

You will tell me: What do you want from me? It's the unwritten law of the newspapers that imposes such practices. If someone is a nobody, I cannot give him space; if in Naples there is not even a dog who hasn't heard the name of the author of *Troubling Love*, why should we talk about her book, interview her on the pages of a major newspaper? Just because she wrote a decent book?

You are right, you acted in the only possible way from a journalistic point of view. You waited for an event that would justify an article, a title, on a book that you didn't dislike. The event arrived after one year: they are making a movie out of that book, the director has a not insignificant name, now it is possible to request an interview of this woman who is not famous, not even locally. Finally, you politely clarified for me, perhaps sadly, that it is the film as event that has made my book worthy of an interview.

Fine, I don't complain. I am happy that they are making a movie out of *Troubling Love*; I hope that this brings more readers to the book. But should I also be glad to realize that a book becomes worthy of the cultural section of a paper only because it has

been adapted into a film? Should I also be happy to have been promoted to an interviewed author thanks only to the good name of another author, Martone, who does theatre and cinema, areas more prominently discussed by the media? Should I also be happy that Troubling *Love* as a film will signal the existence of *Troubling Love* as a book? Don't you believe that by accepting such type of hierarchy and by considering them natural, you would encourage the idea that literature occupies the lowest step in the ranking of the cultural fruition? Don't you believe in the beauty of a media initiative that went back to square one and said to the public: read books, watch movies, go to the theatre, listen to music and build your own preferences based on the works and not on their staged presentation by papers, popular magazines and TV?

I will stop here thanking you for your kind request.

NOTE

The letter is undated but probably goes back to 1995. It was never sent. It was written in response to the following letter from Francesco Erbani:

Dear Ms Ferrante,

One year ago I happened on your novel. I opened it with curiosity, and as I read the beginning I was left breathless. I was born in Naples in the late Fifties and I have a certain familiarity with Neapolitan writers, those of the generation immediately after the war, those active in the Sixties, and the younger ones. But your name meant nothing to me. And then that powerful opening! I read *Troubling Love* in a couple of days, sometimes eagerly, seduced by the colors that the city seemed to emanate. Then I left it

alone to float in my memory. Some time ago I discovered that a film would be based on your book and I came to the conclusion of getting in touch with you.

I am a journalist working in the cultural section of *Repubblica*, and I would be very pleased to interview you. I have been told of your reluctance; I fear your rejection, but I nourish equally the hope that a conversation with you published in a newspaper would be only a small exception to a rule I admire.

If you agree, I can come to visit you but if you prefer I could send some written questions. I wait for your response.

Cordially,

Francesco Erbani

Erbani, on the publication of the present book, wrote to the author: "…The concerns you raise are real …: I also… resent certain media mechanisms as well as the commodification of literary work to merchandise. You are right when you argue that often the newspapers talk about books, not for their value, and neglect authors because "they aren't anyone." But there is another point: I did not write you as soon as I read the book (I believe in the summer of 1993) and I did not request an interview for the very simple reason that at that time I was not working at *Repubblica,* but in a news agency in the foreign affairs section. I talked about it two years later, as soon as I could, taking the advantage of Martone's film."

7. Yes, no, I don't know. Hypothesis of a laconic interview

Dear Sandra,

I am sorry to tell you that I am not able to answer Annamaria Guadagni's questions. It is not the questions that are nice and deep, it is my problem. Let's resign and avoid starting now to promise interviews that, actually, I don't do. Maybe, I will learn with time, but with the time I take for granted that no one will be willing to interview me and that the problem will be solved at the bottom.

The point is that each question makes me feel like gathering ideas, browse the books I love, use old notes, comment, tell, confess, argue. These are all things I like to do and that in reality I do, and they are the best part of my days. But eventually I realize that I have put together the material not for an interview, not for an article, (as Guadagni suggests to me very nicely), but for a short story-essay, and obviously I loose heart. What can a magazine do with at least ten full pages for each question of the interview?

Thus, because I am very stubborn, I put everything aside and I try to find a few great sentences that can give the sense of the pages that I have put together in the meantime. Soon, the sentences do not appear great to me at all but at times vacuous, some time prophetic, mostly stupid. As a result, I let it go, depressed.

Maybe the interview should be like this;

Questions: Is it wrong to think that the mother in *Troubling Love* is one thing with Naples?

Answer: I believe so.

Q.: Have you escaped from Naples?

A.: Yes.

Q.: Is the past tense the true dimension of writing?

A.: Yes

Q.: Melting with one's mother doesn't it mean to loose one's identity as a woman?

A: No.

Q.: Is *Troubling Love* the need to possess the mother?

A.: Yes.

Q.: Is it your disfigured gaze that gives the impression to travel in an hallucination, among unreal bodies?

A.: I don't know.

Q.: Don't you think that your book, once on the screen could generate a film between a thriller and a horror film?

A.: Yes.

Q.: Have you helped Martone in the screenplay of his film?

A.: No

Q.: Will you go and watch it?

A. : Yes.

But what would Annamaria Guadagni do with an interview like this? And then I just need to re-read the "yes" and the "no," the "don't know" to start again from the beginning. For example, the "don't know" digging better, could reveal enough or too much. And some "yes," by arguing, could reverse in a "no". And the "no", by browsing around, could become "I don't know." In short, dear Sandra, never mind, please have

Guadagni forgive me and I apologize to you and Sandro for how I complicate your life as editors. See you soon, Elena

Note

This letter is of March 1995. Here follows the journalist Annamaria Guadagni's questions:

Dear Elena,

I am delighted that you have agreed to answer my questions. But, considering that you have accepted to talk only through writing, we can work also in another way: for example, you could send me an article of yours that follows a little along my line of curiosity. It is your choice and I will let you do it. I would like to have some information about your current life and work. Obviously, what you think is appropriate: what we know about you is that you live in Greece. Actually, I would start from there, from the distance, to ask my questions.

1) The suicidal mother in *Troubling Love*, in my imagination mixes up with the city. A livid, trivial, vital, hated and loved Naples. Is it a wrong impression? Did you escape from Naples?

2) Childhood is a factory of lies that last in the past tense. The past tense is the tense of the short stories and fairy tales. How long does it last? Is it the dimension where one can be Amalia but her husband, too, Caserta but also his son Antonio? In a few words, is it the dimension of writing for you?

3) Femininity is defined into the relationship mother-daughter. But the battle of the identity is to find oneself, by leaving the other, the mother. One of the most unsettling moments of your book is that it seems to follow this path inside out: at the beginning there are two women who during the novel end up melting one another. I believe that in this way, the daughter looses herself, but do you agree? Does she loose herself or does she find herself?

4) At the end of the novel, there is a story of disclosure: the jealousy of Amalia's husband is Delia's jealousy, who, by the way, finds out or discovers to have risen it with a childhood accusation. A mess where the fantasies on the mother's lover get confused with those of the child Delia's seduction by Antonio's grandfather. But what is troubling love, the wheel of everything? The need to possess the mother?

5) Your novel's bodies appear unreal. Is it that disfigured gaze that gives the impression of traveling in an hallucination?

6) Thinking about this story at the cinema evokes famous identity exchange. Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho or Roman Polanski's The third floor tenant. Something between a thriller and a horror film? What do you think about this?

7) Have you helped Martone in the screenplay of his film? Will you come and watch it?

I would appreciate if you could send a text that does not go over 4 pages as soon as possible. It will appear on Unità, possibly together with Martone's interview on his film. I would love to meet you.

Thank you very much. Sincerely regards,

Annamaria Guadagni

8. The Clothes, the Bodies

Troubling Love on the screen

Dear Mario,

I have watched and rewatched the film, it is very beautiful, and it seemed to me a very important work. More than this I can not tell you because my role as a deeply involved spectator does not allow me to do so. Therefore, I will try to write you not about the artistic results you achieved but about the emotions that your work has provoked in me. I doubt that I will succeed in finishing this letter; I am very confused and afraid of not being able to find a line of thought that satisfies me.

The film, I tell you right away, caused me a violent discomfort. To be able to produce your work, you rightly shook the book so strongly that you deprived it of its literary texture. The places, the people and the facts displayed themselves in their most material determination and, to my eyes, in their naked identifiability. From the screen, the uneasiness that Naples, its sounds and its words always cause me immediately seized me. Almost all the characters in my story came alive again moving bodies set against very-well known backdrops, individuals who were often amazingly similar to the inhabitants of my memory. I clearly saw for the first time what a disquieting story I had told. And I was very disturbed and I struggled not to pull back. At first I could not understand what had really happened to my book, how it could have happened that I, the author of the story, could see it only now exposed in its extreme consequences. Evidently, even though I had often said it to myself, I had not take into account that if the director is as good as you indeed are, everything that on the page is masked or invented to

make the novel work becomes emotionally irrelevant and almost invisible on the screen; while, the living core that animates everything reveals itself in an unsustainable force.

Don't misunderstand me, I did not change my mind, I am very happy with your work and that of your collaborators, happy and moved. But I am also very upset by it. Deep down, I was hoping that from my book we would see on the screen how an adult woman, Delia, managed to tell herself how she had used her childhood hostility toward her mother in a very dark game of men to use, control and violently defend the body of an overly seductive woman. I counted on the fact that the rest might remain at the bottom surfacing only here and there, beyond the plot movements, as a beacon. I was, in short, more or less prepared to see Delia, determined as the detective in a thriller, who walks across a city of men uncontrollable in both public and private behaviors. But you did not do this, or better you did not just do this. You certainly treated with care the female investigation among men whose movements could not be brought to order driven as they were the worst and least redeemable features of Naples' past. You displayed the bodies of Caserta, her uncle, Antonio, her father and I would also add of the candidate, entangled in hatred, complicity and weakness, hierarchically constituted through a network of misery, power and subjection. And you put in Delia's eyes a mocking gaze, aggressive, sexually disgusted or distracted, at times pitiful. But you did not stop here. Instead, almost immediately, you obscured the mechanisms of the plot, and you identified with acute eyes, from the very first scenes, the pivotal knots placed in the mother-daughter relationship. It is this what disturbed me. I cannot tell you what a violent and emotional blow was Delia's gaze at her mother breastfeeding and the passage of Amalia among children-work-husband. Licia Maglietta is a perfect *young mother*, piercingly

real. All through the film there is not a single moment in which the image of the maternal body - loved and rejected by Delia with fierce childish passion still felt as an adult in the early stage of reawakening - that is not real, real to the point of being unbearable.

I experienced a painful uneasiness as I watched Delia's awakening, when the aged mother – what an enchanting appearance by Angela Luce – brings her coffee and speaks to her with that affectionately annoying voice, touching her lightly and sitting down beside her; Delia barely moves, her voice reaches us listless from sleep, from affection and hostility. But I experienced the most effective and disturbing moments as I witnessed the hallucinated movement of the elevator: the clash of bodies, the attraction-repulsion, the mother with the swollen womb, the daughter with the empty womb, the whole scene shot with those tones that seem to photograph psychological rather than physical reality. What is real for me in the film and thus difficult to see is right there, in the *obsession* the daughter feels for her mother. The strongest moments for me are those in which you find superb visual solutions in presenting the uprising of Delia's feelings. I am referring to how you set up the bus scene, how you transfer it into the hallucination of the tram, and to the use you make of that extraordinary actor who impersonates her uncle. I am referring to the corporality of the half-naked women in the Vossi's boutique and to the embarrassment-ostentation with which Delia changes her clothes. And I am referring to Bonaiuto under the rain of an anguishing Naples, to how her body slips into the grotto-like sauna, right up to the beautiful scene of masturbation in the water, beautiful for both its visual and symbolic values. (That scene is more breathtaking than it is in my book: the change of scenery for the sexual exchange between Delia and Antonio is effective,

and also in that instance the actor's image on the screen is astonishing to me, swiping away the invention to reveal the reality I know).

But the most telling proof of your great results and the highest point of my discomfort has to do with your staging of the clothing game. You have clearly displayed that Caserta's hypothetical fetishism has no value in itself but acts is really the engine that allows Delia *to move* from her masculine clothes with which she arrives in Naples to the feminine ones that Amalia intended to give her as a gift during an obscure exchange, up until the empty dress found in the basement. You demonstrated that clothes for Delia are always and only the shadow of a body: a maternal body, a body finally wearable, a body that is dead and yet, maybe for this very reason, now is alive in her forever acting as the impulse toward future independent growth. And in doing this, you created memorable moments that for me are the truly moving part of the film: Delia who searches for her mother's smell in the only clothing she had on when she drowned, the brand new Vossi bra; Delia, who upon pulling out Amalia's clothes from the garbage bag, cleans her hands on her pants with a gesture that seemed very beautiful to me; Delia who wears clothes that were meant for her discovering, step by step, that they had already been worn by her mother before dying; not to mention the red dress that Delia wears for the first time in the Vossi's boutique.

At that point we witness the explosion on the screen of an extraordinary image, to which, despite the blow it gave to my heart, I wish a long future. That body in red that conducts its investigation in a Naples that appears expressionistic at times, a body devoured by dark and troubling passion: I believe it to be an important moment in the iconography of the female body today, a synthesis of the woman in search of herself, a

movement that for Delia goes from the icy masculine disguise to the recovery of the originary body of her mother in the depth of the netherworldly basement, up to the awareness that the acceptance of her connection to Amalia has occurred, that the historical mother-daughter continuum has been reconstituted and meanwhile that the unspeakable has been pronounced.

I truly love your conclusion, that disappearance of red from Delia's body which will then reappear on Amalia's large body; that exchange between blue and red, red and blue; the passage of expressions of understanding, satisfaction, happiness, acceptance, sorrow on Delia's face as she imagines what might have happened to her mother on the beach; that which is final but also slightly disturbing in naming herself, to the boys in the train – now that she wears clothes that are definitely hers - Amalia.

In this visual elucidation of one of the hardest psychological states to articulate, your effect is excellent and in its piercing physical identifiability, painful. If only for that conclusion I would like to congratulate you again; you have moved me greatly, and I am still moved as I write to you. You gave visual shape and an excellent dialogic solution to the two closing lines of my novel: "Amalia had lived. I was Amalia". The plus perfect tense had to close definitively the unique and unrepeatable life of Amalia. The imperfect[simple past in English] tense, instead, was meant to reopen it, suggesting a shade of uncanny incompleteness and at the same time, giving a continuation in Delia, who could now consciously take her mother into herself and give her representation. And you, which direction did you take? You staged an excerpt from Delia's return trip by train. You gave a visionary synthesis of the end of Amalia's life from that visual perspective of moving away from Naples. Then you shot Delia's identity card showing

how she skillfully grafted her mother's old fashioned hairstyle over her own features. Finally, you inserted the boy's question about the identity card: "has it expired?" and you did it so that Delia could introduce herself to him as Amalia. With this clever visual transposition of a game of verb tenses not only did you increase the admiration that I feel for you but you have also deprived me of a set of prejudices that I had regarding the limits of cinematic narration.

NOTE

Letter of May 1995, uncompleted and never sent.

9. Writing Secretly

Letter to Goffedo Fofi

Dear Fofi,

I regret to tell you that I don't know how to respond briefly to the questions that you recently sent me. Obviously, I have not reflected enough on many of the questions you posed and I find it very difficult if not impossible to produce exhaustive answers. So I'll try to sketch out some replies just to engage in a dialogue with you outside journalistic necessities. I apologize in advance for the confused and contradictory parts you will encounter.

I'll start from the end, especially because the last questions you sent allow me to start from some facts. No, I have never been in therapy, even if in certain periods I have felt very curious about the psychoanalytic experience. I do not even have what you define as a psychoanalytic frame of reference, if with this expression you mean a sort of cultural imprint, a dominant point of view, a specialization. I also believe that it is exaggerated to maintain that I belong to a feminist culture. Above all, because of the limits of my character which I have had difficulty accepting but within which I live today without too many longings or too many regrets, I have never shown myself publicly, I have not taken sides, I don't have the physical courage that generally is required for these things. So today it is difficult for me to claim for myself a personal history that is not completely private (my personal path of readings, pleasures in books) and thus uninteresting. I have grown through the accumulation of things seen or heard or read or sketched, nothing else. Within this faint picture, like a mute listener, I can say that I took

a limited interest in psychoanalysis, a bigger one in feminism, and that I feel kinship to the philosophy of sexual difference. I have let myself be led also by many other things that have little to do with either psychoanalysis or feminism, or with contemporary reflection on women. I am glad that in *Troubling Love* all these things do not appear directly.

More complicated is the matter of what you describe as "keeping away from the mass media." I believe that at the bottom, besides the character traits I have already cited, there is also a slightly neurotic desire of intangibility. In my experience, the pleasure-pain of writing touches every part of the body. When the book is finished, you feel like you have been searched with excessive intimacy and you wish for nothing other than regaining distance and returning to originary completeness. I have discovered, publishing, that a certain relief comes from the fact that the text, once it is printed, goes elsewhere.

First it was the book that weighed upon me, now it would be up to me to run after it. But I decided not to do so. I would like to be able to think that if my book enters the marketplace, nothing can force me to follow the same path. But maybe I also want to believe, in some moments if not always, that this sense of ownership is essentially a convention, so that whoever is disgusted by the story or loves it will not be able – with logical but erroneous transference – to be either disgusted or thrilled by me. The old myths of inspiration perhaps told at least one truth: when you do creative work you are inhabited by something else, to some degree you become someone else. But when you stop writing you become yourself again, the person you are every day in your work, in your thoughts and in your language. That is why now I am myself again, I am staying

put, I do my everyday things, I have nothing to do with the book, or to put it better, I have been inside but now I can no longer access it. Nor on the other hand can the book re-access me. I just have to protect myself from its effects, and that is what I am trying to do. I wrote it to free myself from it, not to remain its prisoner.

There is obviously something else. When I was young I had a totalizing idea of literature. Writing meant aiming for the highest peak, not to be content with half way results, to devote oneself completely to the page. Over the years I battled this overestimation of literary writing with an underestimated stubbornness ("there are many other things that deserve unlimited devotion") and once I reached a personal balance – I have a life that I judge satisfying, on the private as well as on the public level – I do not wish to turn back, I want to hold on to what I consider a small victory. I am pleased, of course, that *Troubling Love* has estimators, I am pleased that it has inspired an important film. But I do not want to go back to the idea of life where one's personal success is measured by the success of the written page.

Then there is the problem of my inventive choices which I am incapable of explaining clearly, especially to someone who can take phrases or situations out of the text and feel wounded by them. I am used to writing as if I were sharing the loot. To one character I attribute a certain trait from X, to another a sentence from Y; I re-create situations in which people I know or have known really found themselves; I go back to "real" experiences, not as they actually occurred but rather by adapting as "really happened" only the emotions or fantasies born in the years in which that experience was lived. So what I write is full of references to situations and events that really took place, reorganized and reinvented not as they originally happened. The more distance I take,

then, from my writing, the more it becomes what it means to be: a fictional invention. The closer I get, I am inside it, the more the fictional is overpowered by real details, and the book ceases to be a novel, running the risk above all of wounding me as the wicked account of a disrespectful ingrate. Thus I want my novel to go as far away as possible, so that as to be able to deliver its fictional truth and not its unintended traces of autobiography that it nevertheless contains.

But the media, especially when they connect the author's photo to the book and the writer's media performance to the book cover, go in just the opposite direction. They eliminate the distance between author and book; they pitch one against the other, mixing the author with the material of the book and vice versa. Faced with these forms of interference I feel precisely what you define as "private shyness." I worked for a long time, plunging headlong into the subject that I wanted to narrate, to distill from my own and others' experiences what was "publicly" useable, what to me seemed extractable from voices, facts, people near and far, to create semblances and a narrative creature of some public coherence. Now that that creature has, for better or for worse, its own self-sufficient balance, why should I rely on the media? To continue to mix its breath with mine? I have the well founded fear that the media deprived by their current nature of a real public interest, would tend to confer in rather sloppy fashion a private dimension to an object that was born for the main purpose of giving a less circumscribed meaning to individual experience.

Perhaps this last part especially merits discussion. Is there a way to protect the right of an author in his choice to fix once and for all, through his writing alone, what of him or herself deserves to be made public? The editorial market worries above all about

knowing whether the author can be used in such a way that he becomes a captivating personality, thus helping the commercial journey of his work. If you yield, at least in theory, you accept that the entire person, with all the experiences and affections, is put on sale together with the book. But the nerves of the private individual are too reactive. If they are exposed they can only demonstrate sorrow or joy or evil or resentment (sometimes even generosity, willingly or not, is shown); they certainly cannot add anything to the work itself.

I conclude this subject by telling you finally that to write, knowing that you do not have to be public generates absolute creative freedom. It is a corner that I intend to defend now that I have experienced it. If I were deprived of it, I would feel abruptly impoverished.

Now let's go on to Elsa Morante. I never met her; I have never been able to know people who have caused me the most intense emotions. If it had happened, I would have been paralyzed, I would have become so stupid that I would not be able to establish any kind of contact of any value. You ask me about kinship, a question that flatters me so much that frankly I risk lying to you to reinforce your hypothesis. The problem occurred for the first time when *Troubling Love* won the Procida Prize. Was it possible that my book had even the slightest connection to that author? I started to browse through Morante's pages to find even a single line able to justify above all to myself, in a thank you letter, the legitimacy of that recognition. I searched through particularly in *Aracoeli*, but I searched badly and found nothing that would allow me to establish a worthy connection. On the other hand I am not a meticulous reader blessed with a good memory. I read a lot, but not methodically, and I forget what I read. Actually, to put it better, I

retain a distorted memory of it. On that occasion, being in a hurry and maybe a bit selfishly, I latched on to a single line that appears in *Scialle Andaluso*: "Nobody thinks that a mother has a woman's body, not even the mothers' dressmakers." It was a simple quotation that I kept in mind for years and jotted down in various disguises. I had often rummaged through that sense of anxiety that the idea contained in that passage gave me. There it was said that women expert in dressing the bodies of women were not able to do their job when it came to fitting clothes on the body of a mother. I had imagined scissors that refused to cut, measurement tapes that lied about size, stitching that would not hold, and chalk that would not leave its mark. The mother's body generated a revolt by the dressmaker's tools, an annihilation of skills. To dress oneself and to dress other women was easy; but to dress the mother was to lose the war against Shapelessness, it was "to bundle up," to use another of Morante's expressions.

This failure of dressmakers faced with the problem of clothing the maternal body accompanied me for a long time together with the much older fascination of a reader without rigor like myself, inclined to fantasize on a few lines and barely attented to their real meanings. It is a fascination connected to the reading of *Arturo's Island*, which I did for the first time about twenty years ago. I was overwhelmed by it but for reasons that back then made me feel ashamed. While I was reading, all through the story arch I thought that Arturo's real sex was female. Arturo was a little girl, it couldn't be otherwise. And much as Morante was writing of a male '*I*', I couldn't help imagining her, a disguise of herself, of her feelings, of her emotions. It was not a common literary "reaction." I perceived – and it happened to me later with all of her male characters who reach indecent depth in their relationships with their mothers – a disguise meant to do in a

literary way what the mothers' dressmakers are unable to do: release the maternal figure (dead mother -Nunziatina - homosexual father) from "bundling up." Morante can thus take advantage of the limbo of a masculine childhood – freer as in so many other things – not to bundle the mother up any longer, to tell what otherwise in the female experience has no shape.

As a matter of fact, I thought a lot about Saba's epigraph, just to support this fascination. Saba writes: "If I remember myself in him, it really seems to me…." Whatever direction *Il fanciullo appassionato* takes as a whole, in some part of myself, however, as far as *Arturo's Island* is concerned, all that line continues to matter and that *in him* placed there under the title to say: "it seems a good thing that I can remember myself writing about Arturo from within himself."

On the other hand – I believe – there must come a moment when we will truly succeed in writing from *outside him*, not for any ideological pretence but because, like Platonic souls we will really remember ourselves without having to represent ourselves *in him*, for convenience, out of habit, or to gain distance from ourselves. I imagine that the mothers' dressmakers have been studying for a long time. Sooner or later we will all learn not to bundle up, not to bundle ourselves up.

So what can I tell you to conclude this point? I would like there to be a link even minimal, between *Troubling Love* and Morante's books. I have to confess to you that a lot of this author's stylistic traits appear alien to me; that I feel unable to conceive wide-reaching stories; that for some time now I have not appreciated a life in which Literature counts more than anything else. There are, instead, some shallow waters of storytelling that attract me. For example, over the years I am less ashamed of how I used to be

fascinated by the stories in popular women's magazines that circulated around the house: junk about love and betrayals that nevertheless produced lasting emotions in me, a desire for plots that did not necessarily make sense, the jouissance of strong and somewhat vulgar passions. Even this writing den, locus full of pleasure that I repressed for years in the name of Literature, seems to me should be put to work, because the urge to tell a story has grown not only from the classics but from there as well, so does it make sense to throw away the key?

As far as Naples is concerned, today I feel attracted above all by the Ortese of *La città involontaria.* If I were able to write again about that city, I would try to put together a text able to explore the direction suggested in those pages, a story of small miserable violence, a precipice of voices and events, gestures that are minimal and terrible. But to do so, it would be necessary to return to live there, something impossible for work and family reasons.

Anyway, my accounts with Naples are never settled, not even from a distance. I lived in other places for periods of time that were not brief, but this city is not just any place; it is an extension of your own body, a matrix of perception, a term of comparison for any experience. All that has been meaningful and lasting for me has Naples as its setting and its dialect as its voice.

However, this emphasis is recent, and it is the result of distant reassessments. For a long time 'I lived' the city where I grew up as a place where I always felt at risk. It was a city of sudden quarrels, of hard blows, easy tears and small disputes that ended in curses, unrepeatable obscenities and unrepairable rifts, of affections so excessively displayed to become unbearably false. My Naples is the "vulgar" Naples of people who

have reached “security” but are still terrified of the necessity to go back to “earn” the day with temporary jobs; people pompously honest, but in fact ready to commit little misdeeds to make a good impression; people who are noisy, loud, boastful, seeking laurels but also at some level Stalinist, drowned in the harshest dialect, coarse and sensual; people without minimal petit-bourgeois decorum but with the drive to display at least its superficial marks; people who are decent but potentially criminal, ready to sacrifice themselves at the first opportunity, or by necessity, so as not to look more stupid than others.

I felt alien to this Naples, I experienced it with repulsion, I ran away as soon as I could, I brought it with me in synthesis, a surrogate to always keep in mind that the power of life is damaged, humiliated by the unfair ways of life. For a long time, however, I have been observing it under a microscope. I isolate fragments, I delve into them, I discover good things that I did not see as a young woman and others that appear to be even more miserable now than at that time. But even these things do not make me feel the old bitterness. At the end of things, it is an experience of a city that you don’t erase even if you want to and that becomes useful anywhere. I can wander through streets and alleys simply by lying on my bed with my eyes closed; when I return there I have initial moments of unrestrained enthusiasm; then I start hating it in the space of a single afternoon and I regress, I return speechless, I feel a sense of suffocation, a general malaise. I feel I captured, as a child, not one of its limited period in time and space but the signs of a degeneration that has now spread so that the city, with its memories of lost time to be rediscovered, or with unexpected recollections, works only as a perverse mermaid, using streets, alleys, that incline and that descent, and the poisoned beauty of

the gulf [of Naples, *translator's note*]. But in fact, it remains a place of decomposition, disarticulation, and instability that I painfully learned to negotiate a little, remaining on the outside. And yet it is my experience I hold many important affections there. I feel its human richness, its complex layers of cultures. I gave up renouncing it.

I don't know how to respond to the questions you ask about Delia and Amalia. I don't think I deliberately established a metaphoric link between Amalia and Naples. Naples, in my book and in my intention when I wrote it, is considered a source of pressure, a dark force of the world that weighs heavily on its subjects, a summation of what we call today's grim reality, an invasive violence placed around and inside the characters, or in any space of mediation and civility. But, that said, in my book Delia must simply manage to tell herself a story which, however, she knows well from A to Z and has never suppressed. Her story has remained entangled only in certain spaces of the city, in the dialectal voicing through which it took shape. This woman enters the labyrinth of Naples in order to grasp the story, to put it in order, to relocate spaces and times and finally tell herself that story out loud. She tries, and in doing so she understands that if she succeeds, she will also manage to recuperate and incorporate her mother, her world, with wrongs, troubles, passions spent or imagined, restrained energies, as well as those expanded within the few accessible channels. That's it. Even the mystery of Amalia's death becomes slowly irrelevant for Delia; or better, it becomes secondary to her entire story and to that of her mother.

Obviously it is true, that Naples is no mere background. While writing I clearly recognized that there was no place or gesture in the story left untouched by a certain fastidious Neapolitan essence that was unredeemed and unredeemable, bearing little

narrative dignity. On the other hand, Delia's effort consisted mainly in telling what had seemed to her, for so long, impossible to narrate and the pursuit of that path was fruitful for me. It is possible that in the end the most slippery character – the least graspable and most densely ambiguous, this Amalia who absorbs fatigue and beatings without giving in – came together with the least controllable "*napoletanità.*" Thus she turns out to be a sort of woman-city shaken, ensnared, bitten, followed, humiliated, desired, yet bestowed with an extraordinary ability to resist. If it were so I would be happy. But I can not prove this to you.

After all, I confess that I don't like a narrative that tells me intentionally what Naples is like today, what the youth is like today, what women have become, how in crisis is the family, what Italy's problems are. I have the impression that these efforts are almost always the staging of media clichés, the poetic version of a popular magazine article, of a television report, of sociological research, of a party position. Instead, I expect a good story to tell me something about today that I cannot learn from any source other than that story, from its unique way of phrasing, from the type listening it presupposes.

I don't have the tools to speak to you about Mario Martone's film, which is why I remain silent. I wrote to him but then did not send the letter; it seemed to me that I could only tell him what he already knew. I can talk to you instead about the screenplay which at that time I read and reread. In my book, the weaving of past and present is entirely entrusted to the alternance between of spoken and unspoken, an alternance determined in absolute autonomy *inside* the narrating *I*. In other words, on the page Delia is a literary first person, the only source of discourse and the only source of truth in the story; no one

will ever really intervene *outside* her narrating voice. In cinema instead, the narrating voice, when it is there, must come to terms with its own corporality exposed on the screen: it has a dominating exteriority, thus it is always a pale shadow of its literary counterpart. I thought natural that Martone would operate by pursuing other directions and probably considering other goals.

For example, Delia's story, once embodied, was to be inscribed in the *real* city with its *real* dialect. As a result, once Delia was established outside her narrating self, it was obvious that, even working on her silences and her half phrases, one could only represent her from outside, in search of something that she doesn't know and must discover. This is a path that demands the explicitness you mention and that, while wanting to exploit deeply its possible margins of ambiguity, must necessarily arrange, show, state, negate and clarify more than literary word does in first person narration.

It seemed to me, especially when I read the final draft of his screenplay, that Martone had found intelligent and creative solutions. I'll give you a single example to make a long story short. In the few words at the end, I worked, more or less consciously on a play of tenses: "Amalia had been. I was Amalia." The pluperfect of the first sentence tended to consider Amalia's story definitively complete, not with her death but with the transfer, already occurred, of the truth of her experience inside her daughter. The imperfect tense of the second sentence, and the transformation of the subject of the first sentence into a predicate of the second sentence, meant to reactivate Amalia's life, thus allowing her to fulfill itself again in Delia, to transform her into *something more* that, even if it hasn't yet said anything about Amalia, is used now by the daughter *to be* complete. That "*I was*" had no pathological function in my intention. It is not – at least

for what I had in mind while writing – a loss of identity. It is, rather, also a recovery of the childhood game that young Delia used to play in the basement when she played with Antonio and pretended to be Amalia, but it is a recovery that reverses its function. That game now helps her tell herself that a terrible side of herself as a child has reached adulthood; it has been accepted and can cohabit with her other moments of mature womanhood. The solution devised by Martone – the simple response ("Amalia") to the young man who asks her name – appeared to me the best he could possibly do, within a film, to keep together everything that I tried to put in those two sentences. For this and other devices I am very happy that Martone has put his hand on *Troubling Love.*

I hope to have been exhaustive, as far as possible, and I am glad to have had the opportunity to speak to you with a certain liberty. I would like you to consider these pages, which cost me a certain effort, as a kind of thanks to a person who, by defining himself an affectionate admirer, has made me happy all day long.

NOTE

Unsent letter (1995). Goffredo Fofi had sent a few questions to the author, which are quoted here:

1. Mario Martone's film is very respectful of your novel, but chooses to distinguish clearly between present and past (through flashbacks), while in the novel everything occurs in the present of Delia's reflection. The other difference between novel and film is that the film explains a lot, even that

which in the novel was implicit or untold. Lastly, the third difference rests in Martone's great ("male?") reserve in accepting Delia's sexuality as portrayed in the past, consistent, one would say, with the psychology of a young Delia. In this regard Amalia is only a victim in the film. What do you think of these changes and do you attribute these differences to Martone's different sensibility or rather to the intrinsic need of cinema to show, to be more explanatory?

2. The Naples you describe with extreme accuracy and decisiveness (of places and areas, as well as human environments and behaviors), has not been described a lot in cinema. Just as in literature, there has not been a description of the passage from a still working-class and agricultural suburb to the city of the lower middle class to which Delia's family ends up belonging. What impact does this Naples have, and in what way do you believe it has changed in the current process of renewal of the city? Do you keep up with this process? Do you still feel involved in Naples and by Naples? Your geographical distance from the city was a precise choice (like Delia's?) or was it due to other reasons? Would you move back to Naples today? And will Delia move back to Naples? In other words, can we consider the reconciliation between Delia and Amalia as a reconciliation with a fastidious, morbid Neapolitan identity, from which, however, we still need to start? To put it differently, is Amalia a mother-Naples; can she be seen as a metaphor for Naples?

3. You won the Procida Prize–Elsa Morante when the book came out, and critics saw a certain kinship between your novel and some of Morante's works (especially *Aracoeli*). Do you accept such kinship? And how have you distanced yourself from it? (As Delia did from Amalia?) Did you ever meet Morante? And what other female writers, such as Ortese, have influenced your formation, and how?
4. What is your new novel about, if I may ask?
5. Did you imagine the protagonists of your novel to be similar to Angela Luce and Anna Bonaiuto? Where do you think they captured better the protagonist's character?[sic] And in what did they break away from it?
6. What is your profound reason for keeping distant from the media? Is it a distrust of them (of show business?) Is it a form of private shyness? Now that one tends to personalize to the extreme creative works as products of recognizable authors who are present in newspapers and on the small screen, almost as if this appearance were indispensable; yours is a really anomalous situation. Even without wanting to make it exemplary, it is tempting to take it as a model. What do you think of this possibility?
7. Have you ever been in therapy? Do you have a psychoanalytic or a feminist frame of reference?

Thank you and best regards from your affectionate admirer.

Goffredo Fofi

10. Women Workers

Dear Sandra,

I owe you an explanation. The text I promised to give you for reading will not arrive. I noticed that you have already committed to find it a title (I like *Women Workers*, I reject *Working Women*), but I changed my mind; to me the story does not seem ready for reading. In the past week I myself couldn't even read a single line without being disgusted by it. I need time to go back to it calmly and understand what to do with it. But, as soon as I have made a decision I will let you know.

Now don't think that it's your fault: you were really right to insist. In all these years every time you pushed me to let you read something I started to write with more motivation, I was happy that at least one person – you – was waiting for my new book. On this occasion perhaps I was wrong to tell you briefly about the book's contents, I must have perceived your disappointment as editor; or else I felt a concern about the length of the manuscript. You have always said that overly long books, if they are not action thrillers, drive readers away. But, even if it were like that, my decision not to keep the promise I made you has other reasons.

I wrote this story because it is close to me. I was inside it for a long time; more and more I narrowed the distances between me and the protagonist, I filled up all her inner spaces, and there is nothing about her that today I would not do myself. That's why I am exhausted and now that the story is finished I have to catch my breath. How? I don't know, maybe by setting out to write another book; or by reading as many books as possible on the topic of this story and thus staying nearby, beside it, and doing what you

do with cakes when you stick a toothpick into them to see if they are ready: to poke the book to find out if it's done.

By now I think of writing as a long, exhausting, pleasant seduction. The stories you tell, the words you use and work on, the characters you try to give life to are only instruments with which you entrap that slippery thing, nameless, and formless which belongs only to you and which is, however, a sort of key for any door. It is the real reason for spending so much time in your life sitting at a table typing keys, filling pages. The question in any story is always: is this the right story to grasp what lies silently deep inside of me, that living thing that, if captured, extends all over the pages and gives them a soul? The answer is uncertain, even when you get to the end of a story. What has happened on the lines, between the lines? Often times, after hard work and pleasures, there is nothing on the pages – events, dialogues, coup de théâtre, only this – and you are terrified by your own despair.

This is what happens to me: in the beginning I always find it quite difficult, the story can hardly start, no incipit seems really convincing to me. Then the story takes off, the pieces that are already written acquire energy and suddenly find the way to join together; then writing becomes a pleasure, the hours are a time of intense jouissance. The characters don't leave you anymore, they have their time-space in which they are alive, are more and more clear; they are inside and outside of you, they are firmly in the roads, in the houses, in the places where the event must take shape. The thousand possibilities of narration self selects and the choices appear inevitable, definite. Each workday begins by rereading to get your strength back, and rereading oneself is pleasurable: it is making perfect, embellishing, retouching the past to make it balance with the future of the tale.

Then this joyful moment comes to an end: the story is finished. You no longer need to re-read the previous day's work but the entire story. You are afraid. You try here and there and but nothing is written like you thought you would write it. The opening is meaningless, the development seems rough and the linguistic forms inadequate. It is the moment in which you need to be helped, to find the way to layout the foundations on which the book rests and understand what it is really made of.

Right now, I am at this agonizing point. So, if you feel like it, help me. What do you know about novels that tell of women's works spied on obsessively by an indolent, unkind and sometimes cruel gaze? Are there any? I am interested in everything that focuses on the female body immersed in laborious activities. If you have some titles in mind – it doesn't matter if they are good books or junk – write me. I doubt that work ennobles man and I absolutely rule out that it ennobles woman. Therefore the novel is concentrated on the unpleasantness of working, on the horror implicit in the necessity of earning a living –an expression already abominable in itself. But don't panic: I assure you that although I utilized not only the jobs I know well for personal experience but also those whose practice I know thanks to people I know and trust, I have not written an exposé on women's work. It is a high-tension story and all sort of things happen. But I can't tell you anything about the book's outcome. Now that it seems finished to me, I have to find reasons to calm down. Eventually, I will tell you, in all tranquility, if the novel is readable or not, if it is to be printed or must be added to my writing exercises. In this last case, I would really regret to have disappointed you again. On the other hand, I believe that for those who love writing, the writing time itself is never wasted. And then, isn't it with book after book that you get closer to the one you really want to do?

See you soon, Elena.

NOTE

Letter May,18 1998. The publishing house never received the novel mentioned in the letter.

11. Lies That Always Tell the Truth.

Dear Sandro,

You tell me that the interviews need to be done, at least those, and fine, you are right. Tell Fofi to send me the questions and I will answer them. I hope to have grown up in these ten years.

But to justify myself, I'll say only this to you: when you play the newspaper's games you always end up lying and at the root of the lie there is the need to present yourself to the public at your best, with opinions suited to the role, with the makeup we think appropriate.

Look, I don't hate lies at all: in life I find them beneficial and I use them when I need to shield my self, my feelings and my drives. But to lie about books really makes me suffer; literary fiction seems to me to be made precisely to tell the truth, always.

I care a lot about the truth of *The Days of Abandonment;* I would not like to talk about it docily, going along with the implied expectations of the interviewer's questions. For me the ideal would be to create the same effects of literature with short answers; in other words, to arrange lies that always tell, rigorously, the truth. Well, let's see what I am capable of. I feel well trained, and I tend to tell real lies even if I write a greeting card.

As soon as you have the questions, send them to me.

Elena

NOTE

Letter of January 2002. Between 2002 and 2003, after *The Days of Abandonment*, Elena Ferrante released three interviews based on questions sent to her through the publishing house. We are publishing them in the pages that follow.

12. The City Without Love

Responses to questions from Goffredo Fofi

Fofi: Naples, Turin: two very different settings. The atmosphere in Naples was as hectic (at least this is how we remember it, thanks to Martone's film that highlighted its characteristics) as the atmosphere is cold in Turin, especially in the summer when it is less populated and less noisy. Was it necessary to isolate more the character of the protagonist in her crisis of abandonment and her flirtation with delirium? Of Turin we see little, and it is just a background. Why? Is the "ghost" of the abandoned Neapolitan lady, a memory that becomes an obsession, what links this novel more to the previous one?

Ferrante: Olga is not lonely, she is isolated. I wanted to narrate her isolation, as it was the thing that interested me the most. I wished to follow, moment by moment, the contraction of real and metaphoric spaces around her. I wanted Turin and Naples, even though distant and different, to be matched as places without community, backdrops for individuals stunned by pain. In *Troubling Love,* Delia still managed to find in Naples her own absorbing story, finding places in the city with their own enveloping power. Today instead, Olga finds in Naples as elsewhere, mere names ever more unable to retain warmth and meaning. It is this growing failure of these cities that catapults her out of the setting.

Fofi: As the setting weakens, the crisis described by the novel becomes more intrusive and explosive, monopolizing. Do the references of the protagonist to Anna Karenina and to the *Woman Destroyed* of de Beauvoir suggest also the perpetuity of a

situation: abandonment is abandonment, the crisis that follows is inevitable, and it repeats itself beyond time and cultures?

Ferrante: No, I don't think that Olga moves along this line of thought. She is a fighter and she doesn't want to be either Anna Karenina or a destroyed woman. Above all she does not want to be like the abandoned woman of Naples who so affected her when she was young; she feels herself to be the product of another culture, of another feminine story; she thinks that nothing is inevitable. Certainly, she experiments to the fullest extent each abandonment as a vortex and an erasure, perhaps also a sign of the desert that has grown around it. But she reacts, she gets up again, she lives.

Fofi: Olga, a middle-aged woman, hasn't found any sublimation or fulfillment in writing. Do feelings remain the keystone of every human experience, female in particular?

Ferrante: For Olga, writing means resisting and understanding. Writing has no magical or mystical tones; at most it's the need of style. When she was young, she demanded a lot more from writing; now she just uses it to gain control of the problem she has encountered: is it possible to continue living if you lose love? It seems a rather discredited theme, but in reality it is the rawest theme derived from women's lives. The loss of love is a gaping hole; it produces a void of meaning. The city without love is an unjust and cruel city.

Fofi: To what extent have you been influenced by Italian feminism of the Seventies, and did you have feminism's gains in mind while writing your novel?

Ferrante: I have read quite a bit and with passion about feminism, nevertheless, I don't have any activist experience. I have great appreciation for the philosophy of sexual difference, but it is something that concerns me more than it does Delia or Olga. A story follows its own path, it is the receptacle of everything and its contrary; it works only if we let it take what it needs to seek its own truth. I do not believe that we can know more about a book by having information about the reading and taste of its author.

Fofi: Olga seems to reject any "transcendence," any dimension which is not secular and of earthly existence, except of a hallucinatory nature; and yet in the novel there are some invisible threads, strange correspondences, echoes of presences, and above all central to it is the association (which has something of a primary identification) with an animal, the dog Otto – a real scapegoat in the structure of the story. Is it a contradiction?

Ferrante: Olga is strictly secular. But the experience of abandonment consumes her in her convictions, in her way of being, in her expressive behavior, even in her emotional responsiveness. This tearing apart allows fantasies, beliefs, emotions and buried feelings to seep through, a bodily primitivism which indeed creates its own webs, difficult to control, but without any transcendent harbor. At the end, Olga discovers that pain neither sinks us nor elevates us up and concludes that there is nothing above or below that may console her. As for the dog Otto, I don't want or know what to say except that it is the character, if we may say so, who caused me the most suffering.

Fofi: This novel is being released during a very particular moment of Italian history, dominated by the return to a "private" utilitarian boorishness and a sort of public

and collective hypocrisy proper to television performances. Your first novel goes back many years and one presumes that *The Days of Abandonment* was written over several years. Did you also keep in mind the "Italian background" of these years? Do you acknowledge it as background for Olga's story?

Ferrante: Yes, this background you talk about pokes through, I believe, especially running through the new traits that Olga's husband slowly reveals through certain hints of disillusioned political realism. But I don't believe that the period in which a story is conceived and born is revealed by mimicking the disgusting traits of contemporary times. An anthology is not enough to make a novel, not even if scrupulous about the extremely vulgar current times. When you write, you hope rather that the peculiarity of your own time remains embedded in the mechanism of the text itself: in the behavior of the abandoned Olga, for example, imprisoned in her apartment, isolated in the heart of the deserted city.

Fofi: Is Olga's acceptance of Carrano, the musician neighbor, also the acceptance of a common male and female fragility? What does it foreshadow in Olga's life? The question is stupid but necessary. Thank you.

Ferrante: Olga is helped by Carrano to reapproach the masculine after every feeling has dried up, after the withdrawal of love has shown her the naked brutality of relations between the sexes, and not only between the sexes. Carrano is not a linear character, he even has some repulsive traits, but Olga prefers him to the veterinarian, for example, with his exhibited and performed charm. It is Carrano who eventually moves her and gives her a new emotional perspective. I believe that the men we choose tell – as

in many other important choices – what kind of women we are, and what kind of women we are becoming.

NOTE

The interview appeared in *Messaggero* on January 24, 2002, preceded by an introduction by Goffredo Fofi with the title *Ferrante: A Journey to the Center of Planet Woman.*

13. With No Safe Distance

Responses to Questions from Stefania Scateni

Scateni: *The Days of Abandonment* describes a terrible moment in a woman's life and does it with a raw frankness, especially for the protagonist. Do you believe that your "anonymity" was of any help?

Ferrante: I don't know. I have always tended to separate everyday life from writing. To tolerate existence we lie and above all we lie to ourselves. Sometimes we tell ourselves beautiful fairy tales; sometimes we tell ourselves miserable lies. Lies protect us, mitigate pain, allow us to avoid the fear of thinking seriously, and watery down the horrors of our times; they even save us from ourselves. But when you write you should never lie. In literary fiction it is necessary to be honest until it becomes unbearable, otherwise the pages will be vacuous. It is likely that separating clearly what we are in life from what we are when we write helps us keep self censorship at bay.

Scateni: Why have you chosen not to become a public figure?

Ferrante: For a slightly neurotic desire to be intangible. The effort of writing touches every part of the body. When the book is finished, it is as if you had been frisked without any respect; you wish for nothing other than recovering your integrity and returning to being the person you are every day in your job, your thoughts, your language and your relationships. After all, the work is public: therein lies all we have to say. Today, who cares about the person who wrote it? The main thing is the completed book.

Scateni: Your writing does not seem to be addressed to readers; it seems to come out of private writing, with no other listener but the page (or the computer) or oneself. Is this the case?

Ferrante: No, I don't think so. I write because I want my books to be read. But while I am writing this is not what matters: what matters is the energy to dig deeply into the story I am telling. The only time in my life in which I don't let myself be affected by anyone is when I try to find the words to go beyond the surface of an obvious gesture, of a banal phrase. I am not even upset to find out that digging is useless and that below the surface there is nothing.

Scateni: Reading your book I thought about the life that "makes" one write, that the time of living is that of writing. Is this why you wrote two books in ten years?

Ferrante: I have to admit with a bit of embarrassment that in ten years I have not written two books but have written and rewritten several of them. But *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment* seemed to me those that most undoubtly put their finger on my open wounds, with no safe distance. At other times, I have also told of cleansed or well healed wounds and I did this with proper detachment and the right words. But then I discovered that it is not my path.

Scateni: And, still on this subject, your writing is very concrete, physical, as if the body were the bearer of words. It is a writing made of gestures, those daily gestures made smooth through habit, which come apart at the moment of "illness." In other words, it is female writing. Are there any female (and also male) writers you feel close to?

Ferrante: When I was very young, I aimed at writing with virile force. It seemed to me that all the top-level writers were men and thus you had to write like a real man.

Later I started to read women's literature carefully and I embraced the thesis that one needs to study and put to use each fragment with recognizable female literary specificity. For some time, therefore, I have shaken off theoretical concerns and readings and have moved on to writing without asking myself any more what I should be: male, female, or a neutral gender. While writing I limited myself to reading from time to time books that kept me not nice but good company. I have a good number of them: I call them books of encouragement: Tozzi's *Adele*, de Cespedes's *Best of Husbands*, Manzini's *Letter to a Publisher*, Morante's *The House of Liars* or *Arturo's Island*, etc. No matter how incongruous it may seem, the book that kept me better company while I was working on *The Days of Abandonment* was Madame de Lafayette's *Princess of Clèves*.

Scateni: Olga had found meaning to her existence in a relationship and its rituals. Left alone, she has to rebuild herself again from scratch; she realizes her mistake and approaches another relationship with Carrano, armored with much disenchantment. What do you think of love?

Ferrante: The need for love is the central experience of our existence. Even though it may appear senseless, we feel really alive only when we have an arrow in our heart that we drag along day and night, wherever we go. The need for love sweeps away any other need and on the other hand it motivates all our actions. Just read Book IV of the *Aeneid*; the building of Carthage stops when Dido falls in love. The city would continue to prosper and grow powerful if Aeneas stayed. But he goes away, Dido kills herself and Carthage is transformed from a potential city of love into a city with a mission of hate. Individuals and cities without love are a danger to themselves and to others.

Scateni: *The Days of Abandonment* could even appear to be a "feminist" novel….Do you feel in tune with Simone de Beauvoir and her *A Woman Destroyed*?

Ferrante: No, not anymore. I used that book in Olga's story the same way I could have used the story of the abandoned Dido who roams the city, beside herself with anger, and stabs herself with Aeneas' sword, one of the "souvenirs" he left her. In reality, Olga is a modern woman who knows not to react to abandonment by breaking down. In life as in writing I am interested in the effect of this new awareness: how she acts, what resistance she offers, how she fights against the desire to die and gains the necessary time to learn how to bear pain, which strategies or fictions she puts into action in order to accept life once again.

Scateni: What do you think of Roberto Faenza's project of turning *The Days of Abandonment* into a film? Are you following the project?

Ferrante: No, not for the moment. I love cinema but I don't know anything about cinematic language. I hope that his *Days of Abandonment* turns out better than mine.

NOTE

The interview was preceded by an extensive introduction by Stefania Scateni and accompanied by Jacqueline Risset's review (*Unbeaten and in Pieces*). It appeared in *Unità* September 8, 2002 with the title *Elena Ferrante: Writing and Flesh.*

14. A Story of Disintegration

Responses to Questions from Jesper Storgaard Jensen

Jensen: Thanks to the success of *The Days of Abandonment*, you might have acquired a notoriety that many people seek. Why, instead, have you chosen not to appear?

Ferrante: In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud tells of a woman who set out not to write her name again. She feared that someone would use it to capture her personality. The woman began by refusing to write her name and then by extension, quit writing altogether. I am not at that point: I write and I intend to keep writing. But I must confess that that episode of illness, when I read it, immediately struck me healthily significant. What I choose to put forth of myself cannot and should not become a magnet that sucks up all of me. An individual, if he wants, has the right to keep separate his person, even his image, from the public effects of his work. But it's not only that. I don't believe that the author ever has to add substantially to his work: I consider the book an autonomous organism which has in itself and in its crafting every question and answer. And besides, real books are written just to be read. The promotional activism of authors instead tends more and more to erase the works and the need to read them. In many cases the name, image and opinions of the author are better known to us than his books, and that is true not only for contemporary authors but, unfortunately, at this point, also for the classics.

Lastly, I have quite a satisfying public and private life. I don't feel the need for a new balance. I would rather keep writing in a hidden place, with no controls or demands of any kind.

Jensen: Having chosen anonymity, don't you miss direct contact with your readers?

Ferrante: Readers, if they want, can write to the publishing house. I am pleased with that. I answer more or less punctually.

Jensen: Are you willing to give a short description – even physical if you want–of yourself?

Ferrante: No. Allow me to refer to a somewhat brusque response by Italo Calvino, who, convinced that only the author's works count, wrote in 1964 to an expert of his books: "…I don't give out my biographical data or falsify them, or at any rate, I always try to change them from one time to the next. You can ask me whatever you want and I will tell you, but I will never tell you the truth, you can be sure of that." I have always liked that passage and I have made it my own, at least partially. I could tell you that I am as beautiful and athletic as a star, or that I have been confined to a wheelchair since adolescence, or that I am a woman afraid of my own shadow, or that I love begonias, or that I write between two and five in the morning, and other lies. The problem is that, contrary to Calvino, I hate answering a question with a litany of lies.

Jensen: You have certainly followed the attempts by some members of the Italian press to uncover your identity. Did the theories according to which you are a well-known critic (Goffredo Fofi), a Neapolitan writer (Fabrizia Ramondino) and even a Neapolitan homosexual amuse you?

Ferrante: I really admire the writers you have mentioned and I am flattered by the idea that my books can be attributed to them. Even the hypothesis of being gay does not

bother me. It proves that a book can hold more than even the writer knows about himself.

Jensen: Could you tell me how the idea of the book's plot originated?

Ferrante: At the beginning there is obviously a dog, a German shepherd I loved a lot. The rest came little by little, accumulated over the years.

Jensen: Is there an autobiographical element in the book, considering the expressive style that so effectively reveals Olga's sense of disgust and estrangement for herself and her sex, among other things?

Ferrante: There is no tale that isn't rooted in the feeling of the writer about life. The more this feeling goes into the story, into the characters, the more the page gives shape to an incisive effect of truth. But what matters at the end is, I would say, the graphic quality of that effect, the ways writing achieves it and makes it powerful.

Jensen: What was the theme that you were interested in investigating through Olga's story?

Ferrante: I wanted to tell a story of disintegration. Whoever takes love from us destroys the cultural construction we have been building all our life; it deprives us of that sort of Eden which up to that moment had made us seem more innocent and lovable. Human beings give the worst of themselves when their cultural clothes are torn and they find themselves in front of their naked bodies; they feel ashamed by it. In a certain sense the deprivation of love is the common experience closest to the mythic expulsion from Eden; it is the violent ending of the illusion of having a celestial body, it is the discovery of being dispensable and perishable.

Jensen: *The Days of Abandonment* communicates very strong emotions to the reader. How do you manage to obtain such polished writing in order to communicate such emotion? What is your method of writing?

Ferrante: I work by contrast: factual clarity and little emotionalism alternated to a sort of fire in the blood, and a frenzied writing. However, I try to avoid drawing a boundary between the two times; I tend to let them slide into each other without interruption.

Jensen: Today, in your opinion, is it important to be able to communicate strong feelings in order to sell books, as argued by Andrea De Carlo, among others?

Ferrante: Whoever writes searches above all a shape for his world. Obviously it is an interior world, thus private, not yet public or only partially public. In this sense "publishing a book" means deciding to offer others, in the form that we consider most appropriate, what belongs intimately to us. To ask oneself instead what the public wants (strong or weak feelings or something else) seems to go in a completely opposite direction. In this second case, it is no longer my very personal world that seeks for public significance through the literary form, but rather the public aspect of consumption which is imposed on me and my writing. I am not saying that it's wrong to work this way: there is an infinite number of ways to a good book. But it is not how I see the creative process.

Jensen: Would you define *The Days of Abandonment* a feminist novel?

Ferrante: Yes, because it is nourished by the feminine way of reacting to abandonment, from Medea and Dido onward. No, because it doesn't aim to portray the correct theoretical and practical reaction of a contemporary woman confronted by the loss of her beloved nor to brand male behaviors as despicable.

When I write I build a story. I make it out of my experience, my feelings, my readings, my convictions and above all with my most secret and unrestrained depths, even if they often clash with what are considered good readings and correct beliefs. I never worry about constructing a story that illustrates, demonstrates, promotes a certain belief, even one which has mattered and still matters to me.

Jensen: *The Days of Abandonment* is the story of a person who is deprived of love. Forgive my banal question, but what does love mean to you?

Ferrante: It's a living and benevolent force for both the individual and the community. When love abandons the single individual or, even worse, the community, the deeds of human beings take the path to destruction and both their stories and History follow the path of a "*jeu de massacre*."

Jensen: Ten years have passed between your first book and this last one. Would you define yourself as a perfectionist?

Ferrante: No. I am only one who writes when she wants to and publishes when she is not too ashamed of the outcome.

Jensen: After the success of *The Days of Abandonment* , aren't you tempted to strike while the iron is hot, trying to finish a book within a short time?

Ferrante: A little success warms the heart and makes you want to go back to work right away. It also happened to me ten years ago. If the books that I tried to write over the years had seemed suitable for publication, I would have printed one every six months without any problem. But it didn't happen that way.

Jensen: Does it please you that someone considers you the "greatest Italian female writer since Morante"?

Ferrante: Of course. I love Morante's work. But I know very well that it's a matter of a journalistic exaggeration.

Jensen: I find it odd that in the two books which last year had perhaps the greatest success in Italy (besides yours, Margaret Mazzantini's *Non ti muovere*) the male protagonists play the role of the coward and the cad. These are stories in which men are weak and women are strong. What do you think about it?

Ferrante: In my intent, Mario, Olga's husband, is neither a coward nor a cad. He is just a man who no longer loves the woman he lives with and struggles with the impossibility of breaking that link without humiliating her, without hurting her. His behaviors are those of a human being who deprives another human being of his love. He knows very well that this action is horrible, but because his need for love has taken other directions, he cannot do anything but act that way. Meanwhile, he takes his time trying to slow down the effects of the wound he has inflicted. Mario is an ordinary person who finds himself faced with the discovery that hurting someone is often painfully inevitable.

Jensen: In a male society such as Italy, are women in reality the stronger sex in so far as they are forced to develop special gifts and a strong character in order to survive or to cope?

Ferrante: I reject the idea that the female has become the stronger sex. I think instead that we are always more forced by events to face difficult ordeals to restructure our private life and to be admitted into public life. It's not a choice; it is not the effect of a mutation: it's a necessity. To avoid these ordeals would mean to be swallowed up again by subalternity, to give up ourselves and our specificity, to be absorbed again by the universal Man.

Jensen: You have written a short story on the theme of conflict of interests in which you talk about a negative character of your childhood. At the end of the story there is an obvious reference to Berlusconi as another negative figure. What do you think of the current ruling political class in Italy?

Ferrante: I am repelled by it.

Jensen: On the book cover there is a painting by the Danish artist Christoffer Eckersberg (*Naked Back, Morning Toilette*), and in the novel the male protagonist goes to Denmark. Is there a link between you and Denmark, and if so, what kind ?

Ferrante: I have been to Denmark a few times. On the other hand ever since I was a young girl I have really loved Andersen's fairy tales and as an adult I have adored those by Karen Blixen. For me, almost always, the connections that I have with places are those I establish through the books that speak to me of them.

NOTE

The interview appeared August 17, 2003, upon publication of *The Days of Abandonment* in Denmark, in the weekly magazine *Weekendavisen.*

15. Suspension of Disbelief

Dear Sandro,

I have written the little short story reluctantly and, instead of hiding my reluctance, I placed it into the text. I fear that this will upset you, so I will try to explain why I did it.

To tell you the truth, I do not attribute any significant function to a political story; especially when freedom of opinion and the press are still well protected and whoever writes certainly risks something but not prison or his life. The outrage over how badly the public system is run often stimulates the imagination and can suggest memorable invectives, beautiful allegories, fairy tales which satisfy the esthetic sense of adults and even children. But the real political effect? To me, it seems disappointing in general: a rhetorically conspiratorial nudge to a public already thus inclined, already in agreement, and whose consensus, besides being a guarantee of success, is also one of many defenses against irritations, retaliations, insults, lawsuits, work restrictions and other common misadventures to which anyone who expresses himself is exposed in writing against the opposite party.

To be more explicit, but also to justify myself to you, I'll list the questions I asked myself while I was writing. Who is hurt, in today's dark and ferocious political theater, by my allusive and brief episode of grandmothers and residents? Why on earth, when newspapers and non fiction books in the bookstore are full of misdeeds clearly credited to the prime minister, I would choose to express my anti-Berlusconi position in a coded

way, by telling a little family story from years ago? And even if I invented some other parables -more effective, biting, entertaining, grotesque, distressing, and satiric – would it make political sense today to declare oneself obliquely, pretending to tell something else?

Just to get away from these self-critical fits I tried, as you will see, to write Silvio Berlusconi's name at the end of this little story. Look, I did not do it to say that a political story, within the current state of our society, has the duty of emerging from metaphor (literature, good or bad, is always metaphor), but only to highlight that it is necessary to have stories able to say more directly, even through literature, the reasons for our revulsion as citizens. In short, in novel clear questions should be transformed in such a way as this: is it true that Berlusconi *can be* a great statesman because he *is* a great entrepreneur? How did we ever come to believe that there is a connection between the two things? Have we been convinced by the good and fine things done by this great entrepreneur? What are these things? What deserving work has convinced us of his abilities as a great statesman? Perhaps is it his bad television, the one produced by his esteemed employees? So, is it possible to become a great statesman by being a great entrepreneur of bad television able to make all other television vulgar and, for cross-party sympathy, also cinema, newspapers, magazines, advertising, propaganda, and all of the auditel[103] in Italy? Is it possible? If the entrepreneur Berlusconi's greatest work is what we have before our eyes every evening, how could it happened that half of Italy *believed* that he really could, as he says, fix the nation? And besides, which Italy does this man want to fix if he rules together with some guy who just wants to get rid of Italy, and this in the name of a good and untainted geographical area that he christened Padania?

[103] Italian television audience rating system.

It is this credulity not of *citizens* but of the *public* that I find interesting from a narrative point of view. If I were able to write about our Berlusconian country not through allegories, parables and satires, I would like to find a plot and characters able to represent well the mythology in which the Berlusconi symbol is dangerously grafted on. I say symbol because the man will disappear, his personal and management troubles are major, and his political struggle will take him one way or another out of the picture. But his rise as "*leader máximo*" within democratic institutions, the construction of his semblance of a democratically elected economic- political-television dux, will remain a model that is perfectible and repeatable.

A model which obviously has a history (and if one day you want to and you have time, we will tear each other hair, you, Sandra and I, to understand what role the Left itself had in this transformation of citizens into an enthusiastically naive public). Berlusconi is for me the biggest expression (for the moment) of the traditional illusionism of the politicians, of their ability to pretend, even within the democratic institutions they should serve willingly to be kind gods of a certain Olympus from which they rule over the destiny of poor mortals. Unfortunately that illusionism (which has nourished democracy and totalitarian regimes: I think among other things of the *invention* of the leader's body, a macho body, the body of the best one, a saint's shrine, a body of the gods) has once and for all welded itself, by a brazen proprietary relation, onto the fictions of today's most powerful means of mass communication, the television, that factory of *characters* and *protagonists*, as the media call them, rightly adopting the terminology of products of imagination. And the characters, protagonists of social-television mythology,

are experienced by the public exactly as in novels, by *suspending disbelief*, by accepting an agreement in which you are ready to take for granted everything that you will be told.

Berlusconi the statesman is only possible thanks to his potential monopoly of means that best achieve and impose this suspension. The *great protagonist* (to whose abuse of greatness the media have accustomed us) has in fact brought about the transformation of citizens into a public and he is, for now, the most unscrupulous exponent of the reducing of democracy to imaginary participation in an imaginary game. His money, his television networks, his market research have basically demonstrated that from one day to the next one can place the interests of a single individual, thanks to a business group (not a political party), on the political discontent of half of Italy, upper and lower classes, passing it off as an heroic event to save the country and, above all, without extinguishing democratic guarantees.

It is not a nice thing, especially for real liberals. A novel about current times, engaging, full of characters and events, should be a novel on and against the suspension of disbelief; here is a nice paradox I would love to work on. It should tell of today's political dangers but also ask if it is still possible that from a naïve public come forth critical citizens able to pull big wigs and leading characters down from the media Olympus turning them back into people among people.

But for now, read my little story; it is all I can really offer you after so many words, for your initiative. Forgive me, meanwhile, for the useless outburst: if I don't do it with you, with whom do I do it? A hug, Elena

The beautiful form

I don't know what to write, I don't know whether I should write. Indolent, I have in mind Matteo Carraccio, dark figure of twenty years ago. I sent letters to Carraccio for years, letters written by me and signed by my grandmother: her first name, her last name, her address. She used to live on the Camaldoli hill.

Carraccio was a man in his fifties, lively, always a bit loud in his voice, in his gestures, his clothes; everything he wore was expensive. My grandmother used to tell me over the phone about his misdeeds and I put everything down on paper, but in vain.

They were small wrongs, quarrels in the apartment building located at the Chapel Cangiani, between the asphalt and the concrete of Naples'hill, four hundred meters above sea level. Carraccio didn't want her to use a certain passage of the building. Carraccio got money out of her for works that were never done. Carraccio claimed that he was the only one who could park in the courtyard or throw parties on the building terrace. Carraccio demanded contributions for expenses needed only to maintain his properties. And even though at that time I was burdened with my horrible exams at the university, I had to participate in resident's meetings to speak out on behalf of my grandmother, or to write letters of protest in beautiful but pointlessly threatening form.

A waste of time, powers big and small are not afraid of beautiful words, not even of ugly ones. Actually, often times they make books out of them for their publishing business and they make profits from tighter arguments, similes and metaphors. Ownership takes possession of commas, periods, sighs, regret and pale memories.

Carraccio was the owner of many apartments in the building; he lived in a very big one with his large family. An engineer, son of engineer, he had houses scattered all

over the Vomero hill. In good weather, he stayed on his terrace among little trees and all types of flowers, chatting with his wife and children. When it rained he was nervous, afraid, I believe, of a chasm from somewhere swallowing up his bricks. He was the one who had sold us my grandmother's one bedroom-apartment. He had not wanted a check: he demanded cash. We grandchildren should not have accepted, but my grandmother cared a lot for that apartment, she was in love with it, and, besides, everybody told us that it was standard practice to pay cash. The notary himself was neither opposed nor astonished and limited himself to saying: but, I don't have to know anything about what you arrange. I remember going across Naples with a pounding heart being afraid of having my bag snatched. But I was young and doing things that would mean some risk gave me a kind of joy. It was less happy dealing with a man who did not respect any rule yet pretending to respect all of them.

I drunk a cup of tea. Now I resume writing but I can't wait to get to the end and quit making metaphors with a memory. We would need real names, nouns without adjectives to tell how the code of civil life crumbles.

Carraccio, empowered by the outraged number of square meters he owned, had been nominated president, secretary and superintendant of the condominium. He always had the majority in every issue and it upset him when someone opposed him, he said he was the only one to care for the good of the building. The toughest fight with my poor grandmother blew up over certain little plants that she, not having a balcony, kept on iron supports which she had attached to the outside wall under the window-sills. She was really attached to those plants which she had looked after for years, some of them for

decades. But Carraccio considered those supports illegal and forced her to remove them and to repair the damages caused to the building external walls.

In answer to my letters of protest he summoned the residents and he put up for voting a new article on the house rule in which iron supports for plants under the window-sills were strictly forbidden. He succeeded in doing this not because he had the right but because he had the power to do it.

A memory is sometimes a trembling of resentment. I have worked the entire afternoon to turn it into a story of what I detest, but I am not happy. It depresses me that the truth about an abuse of power seems like a rhetorical effect.

When the plants started to die, my grandmother also withered, once and for all.

I drink another cup of tea, I left a long white space on the screen, then I started over again always listlessly. I wrote Silvio Berlu typing on a keyboard with a single finger. I added Sconi only later and I felt annoyed.

NOTE

The letter is dated April 2002 and refers to the initiative of Edizioni e/o which had asked their Italian authors to write a brief piece on conflict of interests. *The beautiful form* which is reprinted here with minor corrections has already appeared in "*Sette*," supplement of *Corriere della Sera*, May 3, 2002, and then in "*Micromega*," n. 3 of 2002.

16. La Frantumaglia

Dear Sandra,

Here we go again. I thought I had become clever, after *The Days of Abandonment*, and instead look at what I have done with the questions raised by the girls of *Indice.*

I am a bit ashamed but I ended up being in a sort of frantic state trying to put things in order; I have opened drawers, browsed through books and here we are.

I could keep all these pages to myself but I have enjoyed writing them a lot and she who writes with passion always needs at least one reader. Precisely for this reason I'm sending you this long letter and I beg you to forward it to my interviewers, clarifying, however, that I have no desire to summarize it into a publishable piece.

I'll be very pleased if, whenever you have time, you read my rumbling among the pages of the two books that I imagine – I imagine, indeed! - to have written (the real ones follow their own path and don't belong to me anymore).

I will be grateful if you will actually write your thoughts about it.

Here comes the letter.

Dear Giuliana Oliviero and Camilla Valletti,

Thank you for asking me to be interviewed. I have tried to write clear and sharp answers, but since you ask complex questions and you do so in a very skilled manner, the outcome has appeared inadequate to me. So I dropped the hypothesis of an interview and I started to write simply for the pleasure of answering you.

Whirlwinds

You ask me about sorrow in my two books. You also formulate a hypothesis. You say that Delia's suffering in *Troubling Love* and Olga's in *The Days of Abandonment* might derive from the need to come to terms with their origins, with archaic female models, with Mediterranean myths that are still very active within them, regardless of their being modern women. Maybe that's the case, I need to think about it, but to do so I cannot start from the vocabulary you are suggesting. *Origin* is too busy a word and the adjectives you choose (*archaic*, *Mediterranean*) have an echo that confuses me. If you so allow me, I would rather ponder upon a word of sorrow that stems from my childhood and that has kept me company as I wrote both books.

My mother left me a word from her dialect that she would use when she felt pulled by contradictory feelings that wounded her. She would say that she had *frantumaglia*[104] inside of her. This *frantumaglia* (she pronounced it as "*frantummaglia*") depressed her. Sometimes it made her dizzy and gave her a metallic taste in her mouth. It was the word for a distress that could not be defined otherwise and it recalled a chaos of heterogeneous things in her head, detritus on the muddy water of her mind. The *frantumaglia* was mysterious, it caused mysterious acts; it was the point of origin of all those sorrows not caused by a single obvious reason. When my mother was not so longer young the *frantumaglia* would wake her up in the middle of the night, leading her to talk to herself and then feel ashamed; it would push her to half sing some unclear tunes which soon faded away into a sigh. It pushed her to leave the house unexpectedly, leaving the stove on and the sauce burning in the saucepan. Often times, it would also make her cry,

[104] Dialect words that

and the word has remained in my mind since my childhood, defining especially the sudden outburst of tears for no conscious reason: tears of *frantumaglia*.

Now, it is almost impossible to ask my mother what she really meant by that word. Giving my own personal interpretation to the sense she gave it, I believed as a kid that the *frantumaglia* made people sick and, on the other hand, those who were sick were doomed sooner or later to become *frantumaglia*. I didn't know and I still don't know what *frantumaglia* actually is. Today I have a catalogue of images in my mind, but they have more to do with me and my problems than with hers. The *frantumaglia* is an unstable landscape, an air or water mass of infinite wreckage that violently appears to the self as its only true interiority. The *frantumaglia* is the sediment of time without the order of a story, or a tale. The *frantumaglia* is the effect of the sense of loss, when you have the certainty that all that seems stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of ruins that we think we are seeing. The *frantumaglia* is perceiving with great anguish the crowding heterogeneity from which, by living, we take our voice and in which our voice is doomed to disappear.

At times I suffer from the same illness as Olga, the protagonist of *the Days of Abandonment*: Thus, I picture her especially as a rising buzz and a breach into a vortex of living and dead matter; a swarm of bees moving closer above immobile treetops; the sudden eddy in a slow water stream. But it is also the right word for what I am sure I saw when I was a little girl – or anyway during that invented period which we adults call infancy – shortly before utterance entered my mind and inoculated a language: a very colorful explosion of sounds, thousands and thousands of butterflies with sonorous wings. Or maybe it is only my personal way of indicating that the anguish of death, the

terror that the ability to express myself would freeze like a paralysis of the vocal organs and all that I have learnt to control since my first year of life might fluctuate by itself, dripping away or hissing from a body becoming more and more like a thing, a leather bag that leaks air and liquids.

I could go on with the list; it is one of the four, five words of my family sayings in which I steep everything I need. In this case, however, it is useful above all to explain that if I had to relate the significance of sorrow for my two characters, I would only say: it's like coming into the *frantumaglia*. I keep a page of *Troubling love* that I have not used and that I want to use here to explain this appearance. The episode is about the quality of Amalia's jet black hair and it's obviously told by Delia during her investigation of her mother's death while in Naples.

"I had my father's thin hair. It was very thin and fragile, it had neither volume nor light, it spread all over my head randomly and disobediently, therefore I hated it. It was impossible to wear it in the same hairstyle as my mother's, the bun, and the big waves on her forehead, the rebellious lock that sometimes softly touched her eyebrow. I looked at myself in the mirror full of anger: Amalia had been perfidious; she had not given me her hair. She had kept the vigorous head of hair for herself, she had wanted me not to become as beautiful as her. She gave me birth with second choice hair, easy to stick on my head like a dark coating, of an indefinite color that seemed a mockery, brown but with a pale black vein, not the shining pitch of her hair; not the dark and sparkling molten glass blown by everyone who admired its beauty. Nobody would say that to me. Even if I let it down and I wanted it very, very long – I dreamt – down to my feet, perhaps longer than hers (I could not remember her with hair down), my hair remained an

inelegant flutter in the air, an inflorescence of my head that did not stay luxuriant among the nice hairstyles, it was not even the mere shadow of that power that gave her hair the energy of a rare plant in springtime.

So one day, I do not know how it started; I was 12 and perhaps I was looking for an opportunity to shut myself into an indisputable reason for suffering; maybe I felt I was irreparably ugly and I was tired of looking for a beauty of my own. Perhaps I only wanted to challenge my mother and scream my aversion to her in silence; certainly, I stole the tailor scissors from her, I went through the corridor, closed myself in the bathroom and I trimmed my hair furiously, with dry eyes, feeling a ferocious joy. In the mirror a stranger appeared, an unknown visitor with a thin face, long and narrow eyes, a pale forehead, a lonely misery on the moss of my head. I thought: I am different person. Soon thereafter I thought: even my mother is different underneath her hair. Different then, we were different, altogether different. My heart was pounding; I looked into the sink, on the pavement, fragments of hair. I felt a double need: first I cleaned up carefully; I did not want my mother to get upset seeing the traces of my hair ; then I went and showed myself to her to make her suffer, I wanted to tell her: look, I no longer need to comb my hair like you. Amalia was sitting by her Singer, working. She heard me, turned around and whisper, what did you do? Her eyes became watery and the shadows under her eyes turned blue. She did not scream, she did not hit me; she put aside the usual motherly punishments. She saw something that hurt her and frightened her and she started to cry."

I know why ten years ago I took out this page from the story. I thought that the episode would tell too much about that mother-daughter relationship weakening other important moments. Now, as I reread it, I have not changed my mind, the symbolism of the hair is obvious, excessively displayed. Mere shyness clearly prevented me from alluding to Samson and Dalilah, to Iris who tears the hair of life from Dido's blonde hair, and to who knows whatelse that crowds and confuses the mind of the writer asking to be used, reused, remade and cited. In this passage, however, I find some parts that interest me more than they once did: for example, Delia's insistence in erasing her mother's image from her body, as if her evolution as a woman could be possible only by leaving her aside. Amalia's final tears, those tears we can not fully understand, are inappropriate, exaggerated. Daughter and mother, child and adult, they see something, they realize that just by touching their hair everything shakes as in an earthquake. Delia looks into the mirrow the window of the mirror and glimpses next to her shaved head a furious crowd of others . Amalia glances at her daughter's untidy hair and sees something that she is not able to define but that it is there and makes her melt into tears: my daughter is being hostile, I will not continue in my daughter, her evolution will reject me, will make me crumble. The pain lies in this movement that barely touches a deep cord. A desired hair style, a rejected one, the present crowded by many other women, a gesture that cuts all links, breaks a chain, ignites a whirlwind that crumbles and makes you cry.

Both of characters, Delia and Olga, originate from this movement: they are women who nurture their own self, they make it stronger, they become aggressive and discover that a mere haircut may cause downfalls and the loss of compactness, making them feel a heterogeneous stream of scrap, useful and useless, poisoned or reclaimed.

To understand if it is true, I leafed through the two books. I checked how I created Delia but I reread only twenty pages. I needed only a few lines for Olga; I still have in mind all the words for her. Eventually, I decided to reflect on both putting aside the books and I found that they have at least one trait in common: they are women who play a conscious control of themselves. Women of previous generations were very controlled by their parents, their brothers, their husbands, the community, but they did not control themselves much and if they did, it was like those who controlled them, like their own tormentors. Delia and Olga are instead the result of a new and ancient surveillance, connected to the need for the expansion of their lives. I will try to describe how.

The word surveillance has been poorly connoted by its policed usage, but it is not a bad word. It contains the opposite of a body muffled from sleep; it is a metaphor that resists opacity and death. It exhibits awaking and vigilance but without appealing to the gaze but to the pleasure of feeling alive. Guys have transformed surveillance into the activity of sentries, correctional officers, and spies. Surveillance is rather, if properly understood, an affective disposition of the entire body, its expansion and growth over and around.

This is an old fascination whose traces I found traces in the ugly term *vigere* - "to exist" that I was surprised to find in the passage of the hair mentioned above. I had forgotten about it. But sometimes bad writing appears denser than good writing. *Vigere* - "To exist" – this verb that indicates the expansion of life is found in the root of "vigil," of being awake and now it seems to illuminate surveillance with meaning. I think of the surveillance of the pregnant woman, of the mother over her children: the body feels a

wide-ranging wave that extends and all senses are affectionately alive. I also think of the very old female surveillance over all the activities that give life. I don't have in mind any idyllic condition: *vigere-* "to exist" also means to impose, to contrast, to expand with all one's forces. I am not one of those people who believe that the line of expansion of the vital female energy is better that the male one, I only believe in its difference. And I like that today this difference is ever more visible. To return to the peculiar meaning of surveillance that I am trying to define, I think about the relatively new meaning of self surveillance, of one's specificity. The female body has learnt the necessity to control itself, to cure its expansion, its vigor. Yes, its vigor. It is a noun that today seems to be appropriate only for the male body. But I suspect that in the beginning it was above all a female virtue, that the female vigor was similar to those of the plants, invasive life, climbing life, or with a word that makes a bad impression – *vigenza* - vigorousness. I like vigorous women who practice surveillance and self surveillance in the sense I am trying to explain. I like to write about it. I see them as heroines of our time: I have invented Delia and Olga in this way.

Olga, for example, having practiced a "male" form of self surveillance and having learned self control and having trained herself to canonic reactions, overcomes the crisis of abandonment thanks to the specific surveillance she can operate on herself: she remains vigil, in other words, she recovers the desire of being vigilant, mobilizing to this purpose the little Ilaria, in trusting her with a paper knife and begging her: if you see me distracted, if you see that I do not hear you, I do not answer you, poke me, as if to say, hurt me, use your bad feelings, but remind me of the necessity to live.

For me the child with the paperknife is a very important image, ready to hit her mother to bring her back to the vigil state and forbid her to loose herself. In a previous version Olga, locked in her apartment and getting weaker, decided to arm her daughter and use her hostility as a child after the umpteen hallucination. The Neapolitan woman who decades earlier drowned herself in the waters of Cape Miseno because she could not tolerate being abandoned – the poor thing, as the neighborhood called her because of her suicide, similar to Dido's after Aeneas's departure – appeared to her in the kitchen.

"I need to make myself a coffee; coffee will make me less sleepy. I went to the kitchen, unscrewed the coffee pot, filled it with black powder, and tightened it. Look, I told myself: watch even the way you breathe. When I was about to light the burner, I felt afraid: what if I hadn't killed the flames? That moment put in chronological order all the gestures I had done to prepare the coffee, shabby and disordered gestures that till that moment had not been in sequence. I suspected that I had not put water in the machine. You don't know how to behave in the world, you are not trustworthy. I unscrewed the upper part, but I got my fingers wet, the water was there. Of course it was there; everything was done as it should be done. But I realized that I had not filled the coffee machine with coffee but with a dark powder that might have been tea. I lost heart, I couldn't make it up, I didn't find the energy. I heard rustling and I saw that the woman in Piazza Mazzini was sweeping the kitchen with great concentration. She stopped a second, she showed me her ring finger, there was no wedding band.

"The worse part is taking it off," she said. "I could not slip mine off and I had to saw it off. If I had known that I was going to lose so much weight, I would have waited.

It would have fallen off my finger, look at how ugly my hands have become, life has slipped through my fingers."

I noticed that I didn't have a ring, either; I clenched my fingers to feel their strength. The woman smiled and whispered: "you will see, if somebody sweeps on your feet you won't get married. If you never get married, this is what is going to happen."

As if to give me a demonstration, she began to sweep over her feet furiously. I noticed with disgust that that movement was reducing her feet to crumbs. Her feet were made of a very friable material that melted into bloody pieces as she swept.
I screamed: Ilaria."

The relationship between Ilaria and Olga is not good, it is similar to that between Delia and Amalia. But contrary to Amalia, Olga, as a modern woman, is able to follow a path that allows her to accept Ilaria's hostile love as a vital impetus, useful against the fascination for death that springs from the past, from that *poor thing*. Together, mother and daughter will affirm their right to live outside, outside the model of broken women.

At this point it is possible to get to the core of your question. The passage I cited, like many others that I will spare you, followed the direction you indicated more or less explicitly. The poor thing from Naples was, in the first drafts of the story, loaded with connotations, a kind of synthesis of the abandoned woman, from Ariadne onwards. The wedding band cut off the finger, the loss of vital energies, the broom as a condition of domestic enslavement and as sexual allusion, and the anguish of not getting married or remarried or of no longer finding any men, the reduction into *frantumaglia.*

In that ghost Olga saw all the female agony of a patriarchal age and she recognized that agony in herself. But I soon dismissed this. I erased everything leaving

only the reference to Capo Miseno, with its Virgilian echo. I erased it because it did not seem like the right narrative path, I was afraid that there was a cut between the past ('before') – archaic models and myths – and the present ('after') – Olga, the new woman – and that Olga would appear as the expression of the progressive fortune of womankind. I preferred to delve into the confusions of times and tenses, as in *Troubling Love* where what Amalia once was is none other than what Delia now is, and so only at the end may Delia state as a final target, as the highest peak of her progression, as the positive result of her entire journey: Amalia had been, I was Amalia. I wanted the past not to be overcome, but redeemed as a deposit for suffering, rejected ways of being.

We need to talk of how pain modifies the image of time in order to understand this point. The insurgence of suffering erases linear time, it breaks it, it turns it into spiral drawings. The night of times collects itself on the borders of a new dawn those of today and tomorrow. Pain drags us back to our oldest ancestors, to the quarrelsome or terrified mutterings heard in caves, to the female divinities pushed back into the darkness of the earth, even as it keeps us anchored to the computer on which we are writing. Strong feelings are like this: they disrupt chronology. An emotion is a deadly jump, a somersault, a whirling pirouette.

When pain overwhelms Delia and Olga, the past stops being past and the future stops being future, the order of before and after stops. Even writing its writing bears the movement of confusion. The self recounts calmly, it makes a clear synthesis, it lets events flow slowly. But when the wave of a feeling arrives, writing moves, it becomes more agitated; it turns around franticly absorbing everything, spreading remembrances and desires. Delia and Olga must calm down slowly so that the narrating "I" may return

to the slow pace of the story. A brief return. The pace that orders the events is only the moment of the accumulation of energy before a new whirlwind. This is a useful image for me: it allows me to think of a time of sorrow that overwhelms us while preceding as a twister; but also a writing of emotions that is a resonance of breath, a wind of the lungs that by producing music moves the ancient relics and passes by while whirling.

Delia and Olga recount their story from within this whirling. Even when they slow down, they don't take their distance, they don't contemplate; they don't cut external spaces of appreciation for themselves. They are women that tell their story from the eye of the storm. Thus, they do not suffer from the conflict between what they would like to be and what their mothers were; they are not the suffered harbor of a chronologically ordered female genealogy that comes from the archaic world, from the great myths of the Mediterranean to get to them as a visible peak of progress. Sorrow comes instead from the fact that, simultaneously, in a sort of acrony, the past of their foremothers and the future of who they try to be, shadows, ghosts, crowds around them until the point, for example, when Delia after today's clothes can wear her mother's old dress as the final resolution. In the mirror, Olga is able to recognize in her own face the profile of a poor thing-mother who killed herself as an integral part of her own self.

The monster in the closet

I move now to your second question. It is true, I can not draw a clear line between guilt and innocence. I believe this is clear in my books; they are concepts that confuse me. I am not convinced by the religious cleaver that separates the guilty from the innocent. I am not even convinced by the distinction between who is legally innocent and who is legally guilty: there are people deemed innocent by the criminal code who

commit very serious crimes, and people found guilty before the law for whom I happened to feel understanding and sometimes empathy. No, even legal guilt and innocence are of little help.

According to legal truth, Adriano Sofri is the instigator of a shameful political homicide, but according to justice his guilty behavior demonstrated his innocence beyond any reasonable doubt; and keeping him in prison is an abomination. On the other hand, if the current prime minister - I do not even want to mention his name - after founding a party with his money and his networks, after setting foot into Parliament using his money and his firm, after making laws that let him evade the law thanks to his countless billions and his mediatic power, in other words after devoting a great part of his "political" activity to create loaded dice for himself and his friends – if one day he were to be considered legally innocent, I would consider that passage to innocence his worst crime, the crime of one who arrogantly abuses his economic and political power, showing the weaker citizens, between one inane joke and another, how democracy can be cleverly manipulated. As a consequence, today, while I write, justice has an admirable witness in jail, while instead of embodying model behavior, it is fatuously humiliated or produces moralists with double or triple lives.

Besides, the whole political class that governs us, without culture, without brain, without justice, ironically considers itself innocent and declares, with a cunningly disgusting little smile, that crimes, if any, belong to others. I detest the tone of voice with which these opaque and boasting powerful men manipulate guilt and innocence. I do not trust their declarations of intent, their defenses, their proud and shameless self-styling. I prefer people who are conscious of the moral ambiguity of every gesture and persist in

trying to understand what they are really doing, good and bad, to themselves and to others.

For me, the ethical torment started some decades ago, inside a closet. There I wished to kill, to punish myself for that desire; that was the secret place of a long conflict with my mother. But let's proceed with order, as much as possible. This closet – I have used it for a few lines in *Troubling Love,* you will find it on page 8 – was a place with no windows, no electric light, in the Neapolitan house of my childhood. It served as a storeroom and it was so stuffed with things that you could hardly enter; I was scared to death just passing by it.

Sometimes the door was left ajar letting out the cold whiff of D.D.T. I knew well that it was the breath of a large monster, ugly like the cicada's yellow larva, ready to devour me. It lay there in ambush, among old furniture, broken chairs, boxes, lamps, an anti-gas mask, but I did not tell that to anybody, perhaps I was afraid of not being believed. The dangers of that closet have always remained my secret.

When I was around nine or ten, that room became a very important place for the first time. My third sister, whom I will call Gina, at that time was four, an annoying obstacle to my games and those of my second sister who was seven. No matter how often we told ourselves that Gina " was passing through the sieve or under the bridge," – slang expressions that meant she is not in the game, she thinks she is but in reality she is not, she goes away, we don't need her here – she would keep annoying us anyway. If we kicked her out she went crying to our mother. If we threatened her, she would whine even more. If we hit her, she would throw herself on the floor, yelling and kicking as if

we had cut off an arm or a leg. She often asked, anxiously and with a smirk: Do I play, am I playing?

Once I was exasperated, so I said in dialect: we need a rope, there is one in the closet. Notice that, I did not say "Gina we need a rope, there is one in the closet, go and bring it." I expressed the need and I indicated the place where the need could be met, nothing else. I was exasperated, I wanted my sister to die. I thought she deserved it because she disturbed our game and had done so since birth. Killing her was not a simple desire, it seemed a necessity to me, even if I knew very well that you cannot kill your sisters. That's why I was satisfied with that sentence that came to me so naturally, I will always remember it. It is the conscious beginning of my relationship with words: we need a rope, there is one in the closet. The syntax seemingly let the child decide whether to die in the monster's jaws or not. But I knew she would go, she was so happy at last to have a specific task. The sentence pushed her and at the same time covered me, hiding my murderous instincts. Indeed she did move right away, she needed a role, it did not seem real to her to get one so quickly. From that moment I remained outside of time, breathless.

So, the child moves towards the place of horrors, she goes there running, afraid that my other sister may go there in her place and she might lose her chance. That ugly dwarf, that smelly walking thing. My mother can't stand her either; sometimes she yells "I've had it with you," so if the yellow beast eats her we will all be happy. The monster is waiting, now it is a huge fly with long transparent wings. It is eager to fill its belly, but it is also furious because at the same time it fills the dark belly of the closet. It has big antennas and moves its jaws continually. In its huge stomach there is enough room for at

least two small sisters like mine, but well chewed and crushed. The image produces a wave in my stomach. That wave grows, gives me vertigo and nausea, eats away at me. I can't resist, I decide to stop my sister. I set out in a rush, faster than Gina. I overtake her, enter the closet and lock the door behind me. I am all sweaty, she screams in anger that she wants to come in, terror freezes my hearing, the monster moves closer, who will save me? I heard my mother's voice telling me to open that door immediately, and the monsters pulled back its paws.

I came out. Gina saw me and began to scream louder, she bit her knuckles and threw herself on the floor, kicking. Then my mother lost her patience; at that time she was a very nervous woman. She tried to calm down her child but could not and she got annoyed with me: why had I closed myself inside there, why didn't I want Gina to enter? Because, I said stupidly, it is our game and she shouldn't bother us. I got slapped.

Later on, I thought a lot about that slap, with hard feelings: I was a meticulously reflective child. I couldn't make sense of it: I had kept my sister from being devoured by the monster even though in fact she deserved it, and my mother was treating me as if I were the guilty one? Guilty of what? Of not wanting the little girl to ruin our games? So, to be innocent, I had to accept in good grace that the third sister make the first two unhappy? It didn't count that I had intervened to save from death the cause of my own unhappiness, and that of my entire family?

It took time to get beyond that; it was necessary to replace the games with a monologue, a mental theater full of ghosts that lasted for years, questions and answers.

Wasn't I guilty anyway, guilty of words constructed to be a deadly trap?

Yes, but on the other hand, who had made me guilty? She had, the little one.

And how? With her intrusive behavior.

So, she was guilty before I was ?

No, but she was not innocent.

What should she have done to be innocent, exclude herself from the game, not disturb the alliance between me and my other sister, live somewhere else or not live at all?

Yes, of course yes.

Innocence – I began to convince myself – is not ever putting oneself in the position of provoking bad reactions from others. Something difficult, but possible. That's why I trained myself to be silent, I apologized for everything, I held my tongue, I was kind and acquiescent. Secretly, however, I was evil. I did not know how to calm the blood that made me potentially furious, I seethed, I tormented myself over this. I knew I was the child who had been able to find the sentence to send the young one to death without bringing her there in person. I knew I had the ability to harm with words without showing it, without bearing responsibility for it. I hated myself. My innocence really was an art of sorting out: I would hide the savagery behind the form of a kind soul and then change it in apparently innocuous words able to lead people who hurt me into thoughts and actions that could hurt them.

I soon felt like a wild beast that pretends to be domesticated; in any human relationship I saw only chains of guilt, an indefinite sum of reasons to answer evil with evil; I did not see innocence. But I often reasoned over redemption. When I felt discouraged and looked for a less dark image of myself, I considered that I had run to

prevent my young sister from entering the closet. In reality, I encouraged myself by saying that I was good at heart. I felt redeemed.

But then I tended to complicate everything again. Didn't self redemption imply that there was a fault to expiate? How could redemption erase the real crime? Isn't it hypocrisy, I thought, to first inject the poison of fury and then its antidote? So why did I move to prevent Gina from falling into the trap? Why did I run to die in her place? Was it possible with that change of mind to erase my wish for her death?

I kept at it, consumed with a sense of guilt, especially when my third sister, now grown, made the teachers angry, did badly at school, and complicated my family's life in every possible way. She told lies about herself so to come across as an ideal girl, only to confess later all her misdeeds before us with intolerable humiliation. I returned to the closet. I thought: she is like this because I excluded her from our games, she will end up being excluded from everything; it would have been better to let her die. I had never truly freed myself from that desire to kill her. Running to keep her from ending up in the beast's mouth had not marked a change at all. The earlier bad feelings returned later. What, then, had that moment of devotion been?

At a certain point, the answer was brutal: that moment was just a reaction to physical disgust. The image of my sister's body reduced to a bloody dough created an unbearable distress in me. Running toward the closet door had only been to erase that disgust from my body. But what, then, was redemption? A way to quiet the distress of one's own body after having reacted to the distress of another person's body?

Now I was older and the more I hated opportunism the more I found it in gestures, in words. So in the long run I ended up appreciating my mother's slap. That thoughtless

punishment appeared to me the reality of all punishments. It served to even out all misdeeds, to justify my return to hating my sister and to legitimizing my wish to kill her. So after that – I remember it well – I planned other, less disgusting, ways to eliminate her: to poison her, to push her out the window, to hang her, so as not to have reactions that would push me to redeem myself.

And so? Was I made for evil? Or perhaps it was not my nature but other people's faults that pushed me towards evil, and that evil then pushed my mother to wrong me and that wrong reinvigorated the desire to kill, in a chain that would never stop?

I choked up. I only found a way at eighteen when I swallowed two thousand years of Christianity in Kantian pills. I concentrated obsessively to gain a will that would be good in itself and I started a stressful struggle to prevent external objects from bending my will to their needs. In that daily battle I seemed to have solved all my moral problems and, for a little while, as long as the effort lasted, I forgot the day when I sent, thanks to a clever plan, my third sister to die in the closet.

But the path is not so orderly, it is the writing that makes it so. From the closet to the room where I am now writing, the path is long and much more twisted, more branched. What at the time seemed a secondary passage has since then acquired strength and become primary. That disgust, for example, and the arrival of my mother. Afterwards I often locked myself in that closet only to put her to the test, to see if she cared about me, if she loved me more than anyone or anything else.

So allow me to go back, when I was about ten, and start over from the moment when I locked myself in that closet to prevent my sister from entering it. Had I really decided to let myself be torn to pieces in her place? I don't know. I remember distant

emotions, confused with feelings that came later. I kick in the dark, I turn objects upside down, I break things, destructive frenzy to keep away not only the yellow beast but repulsion as well. I make noise, I scream at Gina, at fear - and I even feel a sort of pleasure, because raising a racket gets me through the disgust, the fury of the body eases, the harm I do to myself and which I fear is done to me is a hot, invigorating stream. Above all, I feel that my mother hears me and that she will come.

I like it that she turns up and at the same time I am afraid of her, at times she is worse than the yellow beast, she really scares me when she is nervous, I have the impression that she is coming back from the darkness of the black closet like a ghost. But when she is not nervous she is very kind, for example she allowed us to be close to her while she was breastfeeding Gina. My other sister and I would gaze in amazement as the youngest attached herself greedily to our mother's flesh and suck without ever stopping. We would wait for her to get tired but it would not happen, she remained attached till she was exhausted. But when she fell unwillingly into sleep and her lips pale with milk slowly yielded the nipple, our mother would smile at us with her dark eyes and drip white drops from her breasts into our mouths, a warm and sweet taste that dazed us.

Our mother had a miraculous and cruel body; she would do wonderful things but she allowed us just a little taste, for the rest she gave herself only to Gina. I pestered her, I called her all the time and demanded that she come right away, whenever I wanted. She would become nasty, especially if the call were only a whim. But for me every whim seemed a necessity, and that time of the closet the necessity appeared undeniable. When my mother hurried I thought it good; I thought that by putting myself in danger I would draw her faster to myself, in some way more justified, as if being at risk would return me

to her and her to me after a guilty absence. That slap not only appeared unfair to me but, on reflection, gave deep roots to the injustice; it seemed a disappointing answer to a cry of fear.

It is here, starting from that disappointment, that the closet stops being the place of a deadly attack for my sister and becomes something more elusive, a space in the memory permanently inhabited only by myself and my mother, a sort of place of repetition like in certain dreams: always the same action, always the same urge.

However, to understand it, I first need to tell you what was happening to me in those years. Like Delia's father, my father was very jealous. It was a jealousy based on the pure and simple fact that my mother was beautiful. What made my father jealous was not the fact that my mother could betray him with a certain man, a neighbor, a friend, a relative. If he had thought such a thing, he would have killed her immediately together with her imagined lover.

My father's jealousy was preventive. He was jealous of the pleasure that other men derived by looking at her, being close to her, talking to her, touching not her as it was inconceivable, but the mere hem of her dress. He was jealous of what was possible; his jealousy for my mother's ability came before and superseded that caused by the actions that she could have possibly committed. He was jealous *ab ovo*, indiscriminately, he was jealous of the fact that my mother, a living body, was exposed to life. Consequently, my father did not see in other men the source of any threat, not at all. The potential rivals were there, on the other bank, and they could do nothing but remain dazzled by the vital stream of which my mother was the source. It was instead her body,

in every gesture, that was the culprit in that dazzlement. My mother bore the naked guilt of being the source of possible pleasures for others.

I believed in that guilt, it was a secret conviction I have always felt, one that still haunts my early morning dreams. When I was young I hoped that my father would lock her in the house and not allow her to go out anymore. I wanted him to force her in one room, without even breathing, each time friends or relatives would come over. I was certain that she did the very worst things just by showing herself, and so I hoped that she would be forbidden to show herself.

But, to the contrary, this did not happen. My father actually could not stand her becoming ugly; he would get mad if a sentence, a single word seemed to diminish his beautiful wife – he was the first to push her to take care of her looks. Once he gave her lipstick, and I often went to unscrew the jar's lid[105] to smell its exciting scent. When they had to go out together I anxiously watched my mother, I saw her softly touch the lipstick paste and she was then even more beautiful than she had ever been. Even my father watched her, enchanted and nervous, aggressive and lost at the same time. He became animated in the pleasure of feeling himself the only beneficiary of that beauty and, at the same time, he felt increasing anxiety at having to expose her to the greed of the world.

I did not understand him, I got silently angry and scared. His anxiety was my own; I was as wary as he was. Yes, I would have wanted him to be more determined, not to punish her with furious fights for the crime of having exposed herself; I wished he would simply forbid her from exposing herself.

[105] Container used for lipstick at that time

All these were regular events in my childhood. The unusual and most terrible moment would occur, instead, when my father was not at home and my mother decided to go out alone, without his permission.

I studied her, then, while she was getting ready with her usual care. It was useless to hope that in that circumstance she would decide to go out frumpy, ugly, in other words less visible. My mother never set foot outside the house without taking care of every personal detail and this plunged me into a state of growing anxiety. Each of her gestures before the mirror appeared something more to me: something more dangerous, a further offering of her own person to the predatory nature of streets, public transportations and shops. I followed her step by step around the house, I was angry with her, I hated her. I thought: they will steal her away from us; she wants it to happen, she makes herself so pretty in order to leave us and never come back. When the house door would close behind her elegant body, I would be seized with panic, I would tremble, I would be unable to calm down.

The period of her absence was interminable. In my mind I imagined abominable things and what I imagined made me feel filthy in my own eyes. The fantasies became an unbearable reality and I considered my mother guilty of vague but always very disgusting crimes; I wished she would never come back. But soon that wish seemed unbearable to me; I was repelled with myself for conceived all this, I would do anything - I would tell myself – for her to come back. What she would not come back. Then I would leave the games with my sisters aside and I would practically tiptoe into the closet.

I would open the door, enter into the dark and close it knowing that only my mother's voice around the house would have the magic ability to get me out of there. I

would remain still, breathing the smell of the D.D.T., crying silently. The beast would move cautiously in the dark without attacking me, it would remain there together with other colorful shapes of that horror that would briefly touch me and then pull back. Time was suspended, my body lost its dimensions, it was as if something were blowing inside me inflating me and I was afraid of exploding; I gently touched my skin and it felt smooth and taut as a blister.

I daydreamed: I imagined that my mother had only pretended to leave and instead she was there inside and now she was spying on me to find out if I really loved her. I thought she didn't like me so bloated in the dark and I pressed myself hard with my hands, but I started to sob and the more I pressed on my chest and stomach the more I wanted to cry. I believed that she really could sense my danger, wherever she was, and I let that terror rise like a call, so that she were touched in the distance by my swollen body and she would jump up and leave the repulsive things she was doing and come back home. How terrible that tension was inside, a buzzing, words, my mother's own voice blowing inside me as in a little balloon.

This, until the moment I heard her steps in the house. Then my mood would change, I would become curt and resentful. I repressed joy, I didn't go out, I wanted to hear my name in her alarmed voice, I wanted her to look for me without finding me. I imagined her opening the closet door and my pulling her suddenly inside, barricading myself there with her and giving her to the beast, now my friend, so it could devour her in a corner.

But she did not look for me, she did not call me nor did she come looking for me in the closet. So I would come out. I would go around her, her body would reawake a

wave of disgust in me; I would scrutinize her to detect the traces of those crimes that my father would attribute to her if he knew she had gone out the house. I would do it in fear of really finding these crimes on her. I would do it wishing to find them before he did, to be able to erase them in time, without anyone else noticing.

I have written many times about this self seclusion in the closet but without good results. Over the years it has become a difficult topic to set down on a white page. Nevertheless, my two books surely move from there. The closed door, the imagined evil, the fear: why did I close myself inside there? The most direct answer that I have found is the following: the terror that the closet inspired in me held at bay my anguish for the fate of my mother. But I know this is a lazy answer.

To be in the dark, in the most frightening place of the house, was perhaps a form of expiation and, at the same time, a desperate plea for love. I erased the spaces of the apartment, I erased the window on the street at the end of which my mother had lost herself and from which she would return. I abolished my body, I gave it to the forces of darkness; I let it expand until it was reduced to a stretched-out skin. I immolated myself; I surrendered to terror to obtain her safety in exchange. So was I the innocent who sacrifices herself to redeem the guilty? Or was I the guilty one who punishes herself to restore innocence to the victim? I don't know.

Before I was ten, I felt myself in an unbearable condition: I was afraid that every time she went out she would betray us, she would abandon our right path for that of others, and that crime made me detest her. I could not manage to forgive her for the ease with which she wounded my love; she made it inadequate, she demeaned it, she took away the trust. On the other side, I felt that she was unable to abandon us, I felt it in her

body, in her eyes, and having thought that, having imagined it, it became an unbearable burden.

Today, in conclusion, I believe that the degree of our innocence derives not only from the absence of guilt but from the ability to feel a real disgust for our guilt – daily, recurrent, great and small. Rightfulness has deep roots in the shiver of disgust that gives goosebumps, in the disgusted grimace that crosses the assassin's face as he cuts his victim's throat. Women remember that grimace and that shiver; they know more than men how many ghosts nourish and – I believe – occupy the darkest closets.

They are internal closets from which the religious or legal order of the male city appears a simplification, a fence to drive away the heterogeneous mob of ghosts. And maybe, to get to the bottom of your question, it is exactly this that makes the difference. Women still entertain these ghosts, they have a long practice of secret and exhausting negotiations with *revenants*[ghosts] that bite you just when they are caressing you, and women don't avoid them, they know that ghosts are the real inhabitants of that tangle of veins, blood, liquids, flesh that is their body.

Men, instead, have withdrawn for a long time. They rule over vast territories in full sunlight; in sunlight they destroy the defenseless, they bomb, they humiliate, they annihilate, but at night they use the blades of their searchlights to cut through the darkest tangles, and if they meet their ghosts, they get scared and right away call for a doctor, a policeman, a lawyer, some godsent man to trace a line of demarcation between good and evil.

The Image of the Mother

I must confess that when I learned something about psychoanalysis at about sixteen, it frightened me and it still does. I know why. It leads you to look far into the distance, beyond every established order, and when your range of vision returns to normal, nothing is as it was before, any other discourse seems a mask of words put on to hide anguish. Of course, it is a fear that seduces me; I like the visionary brazenness of psychoanalytic discourse, its corrosive power concealed behind the therapeutic promise. As for the rest, I belong to the ranks of the skeptics. Is it therapy or thaumaturgy? I have never been in therapy. However it is rare that one saves himself from a shaking landing on top of a building by jumping in the stairwell.

I really loved Freud, I have read enough about him: I believe that he knew better than his followers that psychoanalysis is the vocabulary of the abyss. I don't know Jung very well, and I have read Melanie Klein with a great passion. I know almost nothing of Lacan, I know a lot about Luce Irigaray, I follow the debate and the fights in Italy among the different schools of feminist thought. It is a mystery for me how much these readings, interventions and discussions have influenced my books; I am a reader who quickly forgets everything she reads. But I wish that the debts I had were small; I do not like stories that are the staged production of the theories to which one belongs.

On the other hand, you cannot deny that *Troubling Love* comes also from what, at the end of the 80s, I knew about the research and debate on female infancy and daughters' attachment to their mothers. The book title itself, for example, bears traces of a passage from Freud's essay on *Female Sexuality* (1931) concerning the pre-oedipal phase of women: "In reality during that phase," writes Freud in the Italian of his

translators, “the father is nothing but a troubling rival to his daughter …” Troubling rival, the one who competes with the child for the mother’s love. At that time the publisher suggested titles like *The Molester*, *Sexual Assaults*, and Freud’s expression came to mind which I considered a good title: *Troubling Rival[n.d.t.]*. But then the reference to the father image seemed misleading and, in an important shift for me, I eventually chose *Troubling Love*. To me it seemed connected to the story that love was troubling, the love that makes the father the rival to his daughter, the exclusive love for the mother, the one great and terrible originary love, the indestructible matrix of all loves.

It was a topic that meant a lot to me then and it still does today, the women-therapists, the women-philosophers have worked with fascinating results on the female pre-oedipal phase, and literary writing can only benefit from this. But I repeat that I do not like to replicate and reinforce the lexicon of some orthodoxy. I prefer tales which, if real, plunge into the flow of pain without paying attention to the “right way.” I always read anxiously those stories about women, novels, diaries, tales of women’s life that touch the dark depths. I expect that something that seemed inexpressible miraculously appears on the page, and miracles are possible, sometimes they happen. When, however, I feel that the story, invented or real, is concerned with being “correct,” I pull back annoyed; I feel there a lack of introspection that women especially shouldn’t allow. You need to keep an eye on yourself, nurse your own individual growth in the inner worlds that we have inherited, and drill there looking beyond the received language. It is better to go wrong with the incandescent lava that we hold inside, it is better to appear revolting for this reason, rather than ensure success by returning to dark and cold materials.

Psychoanalytic theory, like everything in this world, can be used in two different ways. It names psychic reality, it lays its hat on it, in other words, it orders through universalizing portrayals what instead, in the individual, beyond any arrangement, beyond any analysis, remains pure specific interior disorder, irreducible wiggles of ectoplasms, "frantumaglia" without chronology.

If the one who narrates resorts lazily to that inventory, he has no hope of writing a real story. Psychoanalysis is a huge stimulus for those who want to dig deeply in themselves; you can not set it aside, it influences us even when we reject it, it is the map for any treasure hunt among the shadows of our body. However, a map is just a map. A cross is not enough, nor a tall tree, nor Skeleton Island to write *Treasure Island*. It's then a matter of being watchful so that the novel, even moving from well studied and named psychic objects, may have sufficient inventive force to move ahead along a path where there are no reassuring signs or prejudicially laudable tones.

As far as I am concerned, when I write I abhor all the clichés of analysis and I confess to you that I put aside many pages from both *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment* just because they seemed to me to be taken from an instructional manual. It was often painful because what I was telling was mine, I had worked hard to dig it out and give it a shape; I was sorry to waste it by not knowing how to save it from the effect of soothing formula. Here is an example from my second book; the unpublished passages give me a melancholic satisfaction.

> "Suddenly in front of me I had two beings in one, bodies of different times now overlapping. Ilaria is three, maybe younger. I saw her as she is now, seven years old, obnoxious and lovable at the front door, and how only

four years earlier, she was in the living room, a tormenting doll: two Ilarias and one at the same time.

The child she once was, is lying on the couch on her stomach, but her legs are not stretched, she is on her knees. She wears a little red dress, white underwear, it is summertime. I stop at the door, she doesn't notice me, I think. She sinks her chin into the green pillow, a veiled gaze in her big round open eyes, burning cheeks, her hair glued to her sweaty forehead. Her arms are crossed, lost underneath her stomach, they go up and down with pain, she gasps. I sense that she is busy with both her hands on her genitals. She moves like a reddish spider wounded, in its last spasms. I am ashamed of her, I know that children masturbate, I am a well-read mother. But just the same I am ashamed. Did the blonde babysitter, the one with redden skin, teach her? Did she do it to seize the child's affection and to hear "Don't leave," "I love you" and so be sure of keeping her job? Was I the one who taught her without meaning to, out of the need to be loved by this child who is always so hostile? And how did it happen, when? Small engine of rosy flesh, she touches herself frantically just as I must have done at her age.

That thought was enough. Yes, that thought was enough to see now three children, three Ilarias, but I was the youngest one, I masturbated pretending to wash myself, I felt the soap on my fingers, an image that still remains today and that I like; I often dream that I wash my hands using the entire soap bar, I washed for hours with the gesture that my mother had taught me.

I watched and I was afraid. There were three of us: Ilaria, seven, who stared at me; I who resembled her but was younger than I appeared in a photo from many years earlier on a beach; Ilaria at three, stretched out on the couch masturbating and getting the green pillow wet with her saliva.

All at the same time, but in no time; I no longer knew if it was now or then or just a vortex of warm wind. I only knew that Ilaria with her short red dress had lifted her eyes and seen me, but she had not stopped touching herself, actually she had smiled at me with a childish smile that was also a grimace of effort. And I had thought "I should not scold her." But maybe I had to and by so doing underline a prohibition as it has always been done and scream at her "What are you looking at? Stop it and don't laugh, What are you hiding behind that look and that smile, I know you, I know everything about everything, loved child, evil child, I know that if you had the strength and the malice you would wring my neck and then fuck my corpse." Which, by the way, she is dreaming of doing right now, I saw it in her eyes. It is a dream that is already fading away but she will keep that feeling anyway as long as she lives."

Passages like this seem to me missed opportunities. I remember that while I was writing my heart was accelerating and that irregular heart bit frightened me, pushing me toward solid ground, I felt the urgency to close quickly and calm down. But this is really the worst way to tell the story. If the heart accelerates you have to let it do so, running the risk of breaking it. In the passage I quoted, I know there is something that was skipped over, the moving tail of a reptile that darts away. I also know where this something is: it is in Olga's stare at the young Ilaria who is masturbating. I should have stayed there keeping the slippery material from fleeing. But I was unable to do it, I lost my grip and I withdrew into illustrative writing, into false citations, to expel the bitterness from my blood.

This is the worst sin for a writer; it is also the worst sin for anyone who reflects on what he has written. You ask me, for example, if by talking about betrayals I have kept alive the original betrayal of the parental memories. I am inclined to say to you, with that slight anxiety of one who is afraid of being discovered and instead wants to remain safe: yes, of course, I had it in mind. But it is not true, it is not true in those words: I did not want to make the slightest allusion to that type of formulas, they were like ice for my writing, they told me everything and nothing. That is why I strove to go beyond, to forget them, to tell more than anything else a story that I knew well and which , as a writer, I wanted to touch literally at its core. When a writer narrates, the only thing that should matter is finding our words tumbling out to then flood the identified territory with the ravaging persistence of mucilage. In the case of abandonment, I tried to tell what destructuring force it still releases today, even there where the abandoned one has remarkable instruments of defense, resistance and counter-attack. Oftentimes the

narration of crisis has appeared to me to be built on quicksand; I believed it was necessary to give Olga more history, more past and more motivations. I worked hard at this. But when I realized that I was either risking to normalize her tragedy, or confusing the abandoned woman with the cold investigating Delia from the previous book (of whom besides she is a literarily sister), or especially when I realized that, by searching for reasons, I was about to return a bit academically to the theme of attachment to the mother, I let it go. I have saved only a few essential lines of this former path, the rest has gone into the drawer. From that I now pull out some pages for you, those (expunged) in which I tell how Olga struggles to understand Mario's betrayal, thinking back on her erotic experience, and the occasions when she planned to betray him.

"What a mistake to sleep together: a habit that lays the foundations of loneliness and prepares the chill of when the other opens the door and leaves.

I stayed the whole night in the darkness, in bed besieged by a parade of pale shadows. Mario speaking, Mario smiling, Mario in each of his charming gestures. My sisters and my mother had immediately liked him. My father did not; my father limited himself to addressing only a few cool words to him. For a little while I was afraid that he was actually hostile to him, but instead he was only shyly standoffish; later on he seemed to get used to him as to an annoying obstacle to avoid mechanically so as not to knock heads.

I did not dislike that indifference, I loved my father very little; since childhood, I felt him as an intruder who gave off a heavy fish market smell, miserably alien to the good smells of the family. My father had better to do little with Mario. Better still that Mario had nothing to do with any of my relatives. I did not like it that my mother often praised, in emotional tones, his blue-green eyes and started talking about the identical color of those of her father, her older brother, and her grandfather. I adored Mario's eyes but I was annoyed that she reconnected them back to herself and to her natal family. I had brown eyes and at times when I saw Mario cuddled by all the women in the house, I felt excluded; I was afraid that he, starting with my eyes, might also notice my disgusted alienation from my mother's attractive descendents. I decided to keep him far away from my house, actually I planned to abandon that house soon, it was a plan I had been thinking about for some time, ever since I dreamt of leaving the whole family during the night and going to live with the gypsies with dark eyes.

We had our first sexual intercourse at his parents' house, in silence, in his bedroom so messy it seemed like a storage room. We were both inexperienced. He could not penetrate me, I pretended nothing was wrong but I felt only pain. At one point, he knelt on the bed, spread my leg delicately, and examined my sex with a clinical eye, as if he were doing some calculations. After that, he stretched out again on me and resumed thrusting his sex inside mine, helping himself with his hand and asking in a whisper, kindly: Am I hurting you? I answered no and I suffered. When at last he succeeded in penetrating me, I hugged him tightly to make him feel my gratitude. He never got angry, he never blamed me. I realized that I really loved him for this and I would have loved him for the rest of my life.

We got married two years later, with time we got enough experience with our genitals. I taught him to caress me for a long time and he did it with patient skill. Reflecting on it now, more than his thin adolescent body with the palest skin, more than his slender sex, erect with elegance, I loved his compliant availability, the domestic flavor he had, the smell.

I abandoned myself in his arms as if they were a little dress of my infancy and I had returned to childhood yet remained miraculously an adult, without even the annoying obligation of acting like a child. I contributed to his pleasure with care, I welcomed him into myself, I let myself be shaken with his sudden fierce thrusts. But what really connected me to his taut body, frantically eager for me, was the sense of sweet drowning he brought about in me as if his thrusts had plunged me inside my own veins, my hot blood. For three years I hardly noticed the attentions of other males of any age, who

seemed to me only incomprehensible movements of shadows on walls, there was only Mario.

Then I met the brother of an acquaintance of mine, who worked for a newspaper. He expressed himself only in a cutting sarcastic way, but in my presence he became suddenly dreamy. Knowing he liked me made me like him, but I never thought of him as a prospective lover. Nevertheless, I started to want him to want me. I did nothing to see him more often, but any time I knew I might meet him I took care of my appearance in a special way. And then running into him, feeling his silent passion, brought me a barely contained joy. I accepted a coffee and I noticed how he got upset if he just brushed against me or how pleased he succeeded in making me laugh. Once he tried to kiss me, I rejected him with disgust. He said that he loved me, he understood that I felt something for him, too. I answered that I did not feel anything for him and he got depressed and grumbled that I had just mocked him. For a little while he continued to insist, I continued to make myself pretty for him, I was sorry to give up that game. Then he got tired and made a point of not meeting me again, and I forgot his existence. Yet sometimes I went back to the coffee bar of that attempted kiss and I looked at the space in which that attempt had occurred, savoring a melancholic trace of emotion.

In bed now, in the huge matrimonial bed, I told myself that if I wanted to understand why Mario had left me I had to think about the pleasure of mini-stories like that, stories with no prospects, a harmless frivolous satisfaction that brightens the day. Perhaps for him also, it had begun like this; I had to accept that fact and extract the normality of his betrayal from the norm of my playful seductions . But why had he crossed the boundary line and I had not? I thought about it. There are people who stop,

and others who do not, and we do not understand what pushes us to the top and what stops us. Over the years, my opportunities for short affairs multiplied, they became my secret vice; I consciously looked for them to renew the sense of a full life that they gave me. When they started, I got great self esteem from them, I suffered less for my duties as a wife and mother with no job, they made me want to read, study, and begin writing again. Above all, I was suddenly surprised by what I was like, by my mouth, my eyes, my breasts; I went to the hairdresser more often, I bought lingerie and new dresses. Time was marked by occasional meetings with my admirer of the moment, men who were enchanted by me and in turn enchanted them, men I never looked for, at most they were encouraged considering the circumstances – a concert, the presentation of a book, a party to which I decided to go only because I knew he would go.

Even my sensibility in those circumstances has increased. If, during a walk or a ride in the car, his passionate words pierced through the smell of the burnt brushwood or of the petrol fumes of the traffic, the smell of burning and the petrol that flowed from the pump into the tank, moved me, even when the present lover had vanished, without anything having actually occurred.

Only once did I let him kiss me and during that kiss I didn't refuse the hand that pressed on my blouse, searching under my skirt. I went along with thins not for desire but only because I was sorry for him. He was the owner of a big bookshop in the city center. He had the cunning and satisfied eyes of one who always jokes with his shop assistants and it was clear that he considered them the joyful target of his happiness as a manager. But in a short time his passion for me made him serious, he continuously tried to have profound feelings and thoughts for which he didn't have any attitude. That night

it seemed to me that he was deadly tired by the vain desire I inspired him. We were in the car along a road close to my house; I was afraid Mario could come back from work or that some neighbors might see me.

I wasn't feeling well, I had a sore throat, maybe the flu. His rough tongue in my mouth disgusted me, it seemed salty to me, bitter with tobacco. I wondered why I was there with him, a stranger, why it was happening, what was happening; all my body felt empty, empty of words and affections. Nevertheless, paradoxically, in perceiving that disheartening emptiness, I felt a nice excitement that embarrassed me. I quickly told him that I needed to leave; I opened the door and run away. When I returned, Mario was already home, the dinner was not ready, I started cooking. In my mouth, I had the disgusting taste of that man, in my nostrils his smell of tobacco, and I was mad because the disgust clashed with the lasting sexual excitement. As soon as it was possible, I went to the bathroom to clean away the nicotine, Mario didn't smoke, nor did I. I brushed my teeth many times and with a lot of toothpaste. I took a shower, went to bed and the excitement did not wear off. I had just lied down when Mario put his hand under my nightdress and touched my genitals. I had a violent reaction, jumped out of the bed assaulting him with strong disgusted words for his disrespect. I looked at him, in his green-blue eyes that usually moved me. I felt, instead, a sudden repulsion for that family color, as if he belonged to the genealogy of my blood and this made him disgusting. Mario was stunned, he did not understand, neither did I. I was wrong, I knew it but I felt absolutely sure I was right. I felt a ferocious rage thinking he had tried to touch me with that intrusive act, and the fact that it was an old habit, that he had done it every night before going to sleep as a kind of good night, made me even angrier.

I didn't have any privacy then; I was exposed to a sort of permanent control of emotions. Unbearable, I couldn't calm down. I thought he had no right to intrude, at that moment I was sure that it was right to protect the secrecy of my body's reactions; my life was my life.

Mario didn't say anything, he withdrew spaced out. I went angrily to the kitchen to prepare a tisane. The following day, the owner of the bookshop looked for me, he was not immersed in deep thoughts, he joked and laughed in light humor; he seemed convinced that after that kiss, after his hands on my blouse, on my stocking, everything was clear between us. Now, we only needed to find a satisfying way to develop our passion. He was surprised, smiled in disbelief when I told him that I did not feel that need and I coldly told him that I had not liked his kiss, I did not really like anything about him. He did not believe me, he nagged at me for days, for months. I stopped looking for occasions to meet him, eventually he gave up and I did not see him anymore.

The frenzy for courting returned soon. The darkest story was recent, and it included the husband of one of Mario's colleagues. It happened one year after our first marriage crisis, I was depressed, I despised myself for my mediocrity; my children especially tired me. As I was used to hanging around the house with a mourning face, which was intolerable to me first, Mario, maybe to distract me, or maybe to avoid remaining with me alone, planned a full schedule of dinners at which he methodically invited all his university colleagues. He cooked and made the children help him as in a game, I played the role of the host and I possibly cleaned the table with my empty head, unwillingly putting dishes and pans in the dish washer.

Everything changed the evening Cecilia came: she was a fifty-year old woman, very educated, elegant, with beautiful lapislazzuli earrings and smart eyes, a woman Mario had such a profound respect for as to be speechless. I knew her only through Mario's passionate accounts, and only in seeing her did I feel such great emotion. I liked everything about her, I was immediately moved by the fact she addressed me with a tone of real interest, so that, to my own surprise, I started to talk to her about the works I had done in the past, the book I had written, and about how I was now hopelessly stuck.

Her husband arrived later. He was an architect from Ferrara who moved to Turin, a professional consumed by several commitments. He was Cecilia's age, tall, very slim, with a thick blonde beard that once must have been red; a man of abrupt manners and words that always verged on becoming offensive. Ernesto – his wife told him with a low tone as soon as he stared laughing too loud – the children are sleeping. He immediately regained his composure and addressed me as if he was seeing me for the very first time with the face of one who does not care for children; he smiled and apologized to me with such a slight sarcastic tone that made me imagine him as a ghost committed to play the fake part of a man who enjoyed himself in pretending to be a woman. After that, the evening went on weakly for a little while. Mario, in Cecilia's presence, had lost his sparkling wit and whatever he said appeared stupid or naïve, to the point of becoming, ironically, a chance for Ernesto. As far as I was concerned, only because I was encouraged by Cecilia's serene condescension, and maybe to make a good impression on her and hear her appreciation, I started to express opinions I did not even know I had but that were pulled out on the surface by her attractive way of chatting. One sentence after the other and the atmosphere of the evening changed. Ernesto started being interested in

each word I said, he laughed moving his small chest, he was deeply moved as if an idea seemed good to him, he often repeated for Mario with the obvious aim of humiliating him: you don't know what you are saying, your lady does and she is very intelligent, you aren't. Cecilia smiled and whispered: Ernesto.

Their dinner followed ours. I did not want to go, I was afraid that with his exaggerated compliments Ernesto would tease me. That night, I took a long shower and under those aggressive and thick nails of water I discovered a desire to stop the mysterious mourning that had affected me. While I was drying my hair, I suddenly start to feel the joy of choosing a dress again, a pair of shoes, or a new make up. Ernesto slightly noticed my beauty, it was his wife who paid me a lot of compliments and I realized that I had prepared myself only for those compliments, the compliments of a very refined lady, with a barely furnished house but where everything suited her cultivated taste.

For the entire night I talked to her in a low voice. Her husband continued to humiliate Mario, he did it with no tact but with ferocity; then suddenly he offered him a well paid consultancy for a job he was doing. We toasted. For the first time I noticed Ernesto's figure next to Cecilia's. It seemed to me that that closeness gave him the right light, as it happened with the dresses she wore, the furniture she was surrounded by, or the books she was talking about. Suddenly I found myself thinking that if Cecilia had spent so many years with that man, he had to have a hidden refined side, a way of being adequate to her way of being. I looked at him, secretly. He had a natural elegant posture, long hands, his slim face had kept time away. Together they made a couple that seemed

like a pair of plates in an old weigh scale, he was very lively and aggressive, going up, she was tolerant, motherly vigil, pushing down.

Since that day, they came often to our house, Ernesto always having something to discuss with Mario about work. He would arrive and immediately scream something deprecatory at him, he would kiss me on my cheeks, sometimes on my neck as for a badly controlled movement of his lips, then he would not take any notice of me anymore but he would quarrel with my husband only, at times furiously, resentfully. I gladly stayed to chat with Cecilia but soon felt that Ernesto's carelessness way, always ready to capture, even in the middle of a very exciting discussion, any small sign of his wife which irritated me, wounded me, made me feel insignificant. I soon detested his ignoring me, I was afraid that he might undermine me in front of that calm lady I wanted to please, of whom I demanded esteem. I felt better only when he would catch half of my sentence and by interrupting his discussion with Mario, he looked at me curiously and said: here is a beautiful lady who knows how to act.

I decided to react. I started to scroll through the papers to find the public occasions at which Ernesto and his wife might have participated. Suddenly it was necessary for me that that man would notice me, appreciate my qualities, and acknowledge I had interests and thoughts no different than himself or his wife. Slowly, according to a routine I was very familiar with, I started to go to places where I could have met them, dressing up carefully for the occasion. Sometimes they were there, sometimes they were not. When they were there, he would greet me with a theatrical gesture, pointing to his wife among the people; he would yell my name in the middle of a lecture without caring of embarrassing me. If instead they were not there, I would sit

down, listening to boring lectures, checking the entrance and the public here and there but eventually I would go home disappointed.

Once Mario had to go to a conference to the lake of Garda with Cecilia. He asked me to go, weakly, I decided to go only when he told me that Cecilia hoped I would go, Ernesto was busy and would not have gone. I was flattered by that request, so we made arrangements for the children and then we left. But I soon found out that that choice had been a mistake. Mario and Cecilia were busy with commitments, and greatly esteemed by everybody surrounded by an aura of esteem. Cecilia especially was always at the centre of attention, I looked at her, she was always friendly, she had a careful gaze, she intervened with soft and authoritative tones but always in agreement. I soon felt like a shadow, a plant in an apartment.

Then, surprisingly on the second day, Ernesto seemed very happy and looking younger in his good spirit. He had gotten rid of his commitments and immediately declared that he would not have spent a single minute in the conference room not even to listen to Cecilia's lecture or Mario's, and he pulled me out for a walk, to the bar, in the restaurant, arguing: we are not made for those stupid things. He was curious of everything, contrary to Mario, he was amused by troubles and hated silence or dead times. Over the next two days, I felt an immense joy in dressing up, putting my make up on for him, crossing my legs in front of him, feeling his arm under mine. I soon understood that he liked me, that he hadn't come for his wife but more for me. I gained a feeling of force from that, stronger than the previous short stories.

After that occasion, the relationship between us intensified. When we met together with other acquaintances or went for a walk, or to the cinema, or to the

restaurant, I always felt myself to be closer to Ernesto, I trembled every time I ended up walking with Cecilia and seeing him chatting with other women; I often grasped Mario's arm and without making it too clear I pushed him towards Ernesto so that he could see me and remember me. In other words, I managed to attract his attention, to cross his gaze, to sit next to him, and the fact that he didn't clearly do the same, that he let himself laugh aloud with very content women, made me suffer. Then, I cured my obsession by forcing myself to be impudent, at times. Mario never noticed anything. Only Cecilia at a certain point started treating me with a kind indifference, upsetting me as if there had been a misunderstanding. Once it seemed as if she was looking at me even though her gaze was somewhere else, not with her eyes but with her earrings, pupils under her fleshy ear lobes. She is jealous, I told myself with a sincere regret and a slight embarrassing satisfaction: is it possible that a woman so worldly knowledgeable, so refined, is jealous of me?

The work with Mario ended in slight disagreements; Ernesto called less frequently, and I was overwhelmed again by the bad mood. It made me sad not seeing him. I often thought of calling him, of looking for opportunities to meet him, other than with Mario and Cecilia, of establishing a sort of friendship. I gave up for prudence, for shame, those virtues that I detested in me. At a certain point there was another conference in Erice, an important international conference. Mario asked me to go with him, insisted, Cecilia was going too and she insisted too, I accepted. But when I knew that Ernesto was busy and he would have remained in Turin for his work, I found a way of cautiously pulling out. Mario left, the children went to some friends' who wanted to host them for the night, I remained by myself.

I spent a lot of time close to the phone, I waited until it became dark. What was wrong in calling him? He was my friend at this stage, surely more a friend to me than to Mario. We both were alone in the city, and it was just a nice way to spend the night and that was it. But I was lying to myself and I knew it. I had passed the limits almost without perceiving it. If he had invited me out for dinner, I would have accepted. If he had invited me to dine at his house, I would have accepted. If he had asked me to cook something for him, I would have done it, see you at my place, I would have proposed to him. I made the phone call with my heart bouncing, knowing that I was making a decisive act in my life, because, if he had kissed me I would have kissed him back. If he had asked me to make love to him, I would have done it. If he had asked me to leave Mario and my children, I would have not hesitated. If he had obliged me to move with him, change city, even if I was thirty four and he was sixteen years older than me, I would have followed him.

He answered me, nervously, on the second ring. I tried some ironic words on how he felt being at home by himself, in boring Turin. He answered that he was feeling good and he was not alone. At the very last moment Cecilia had decided to stay, there were too many things to do at the university, and they were working. I blushed for the shame and I swallowed my own voice. He abruptly passed me to Cecilia who insisted to have me to dinner. I refused, hating myself. I had revealed to her and myself that I wanted to steal her husband. A desire more than an intention, a desire born from the same admiration I had for her. Would I have liked Ernesto, if he had not gone to bed with her every evening for decades? Now, it seemed like an illusion to me to fill her place and abandon mine. Would I have fantasized about that man if he had not been that distant

woman's husband, so clearly better than me, a woman I would have loved to become through study and writing? I hung up the phone with a strong distress in my stomach, a frenzy of laceration.

Today, after many years, as the furious singing of the birds starts, I was thinking: if I have been like this, why should I be surprised of Mario? What is destroying me? I know his path, I know how it has begun, how it has continued. I have only to remain silent, to accept and wait. But I didn't convince myself, I told myself, no. I jumped out of the bed mad, opening the shutters with energy so that I could see the dawn. There was a difference between me and him: I had dreamt of betraying him, he had done it. I did not even know if those men I only slightly touched were shadows of old desires, lies that I now often told myself at dawn to pretend to having a life independently of him; he had instead really hidden himself in another person's flesh. That difference counted. He did not notice anything indispensable in me. Nothing among the images with which I must have appeared in his eyes had been able to hold him. I instead brought with me invisible chains that had held me in humiliating him, as if the imagined wound of many inconsistent stories, and the reality could not host him and only hurt me."

It is a long passage; I hope you will forgive me. I have taken it out from my book for many reasons that it are not necessary to list here (for example a boring superficial easiness that was not appropriate for Olga). I will underline for you only the reason in connection with your question: Olga's short stories, as you have noticed, are interconnected by her need to betray and to be faithful to the man her mother had symbolically liked; a man who, for this reason, has a sort of parental mark. This mark and its visibility seemed a mistake to me.

The suggestion that supported the long erotic discussion came scientifically from a couple of passages in *Female Sexuality*, the paragraph previously mentioned *Troubling Love*. In there, Freud talks at least twice and in a very curious way about marriage. Once he says that women, even when they choose their husbands on their father's model, "they repeat with him , during the marriage, the same bad relation they have with their mother." Secondly, Freud hypothesis that the "attachment to the mother is doomed to disappear exactly because it is the first link and because it is very intense." He argues that this is what exactly happens in marriage when women have their highest love; even in this case their first love does not hold against the inevitable disappointments, the accumulation of reasons for aggressiveness. "The second marriage", he argues, "turns out to be better."

Now, in discussing Olga's sexuality and what I do know about sexuality, I wanted at least three things to be assumed, all of them inspired by those passages, even if in a critical way: first, for women any love relationship, matrimonial or not, is based not *only for bad but also for good* on the reactivation of their primitive relationship with their mother. Second, the marriage – first, second or third, heterosexual or homosexual – can not erase from the female life the troubling love for the mother figure, the only love-hate that lasts for ever. Third, what has prevented Olga in betraying Mario is that Mario, since the beginning, has unconsciously become for her a series of fantasies connected to her mother, and this especially will make the abandonment so devastating.

Obviously, these beliefs remain and they are part of my way of seeing things. But I wished that Olga's story, even taking other directions here and there, could have done it in a silent and visible. When one begins a story, they need to be the only source of it, they need to loose themselves in it for there are no planned maps. If clear traces of

something learned in the books read remain, if it's possible they need to erase them with no indulgency. Because it's not always possible, nor is it good: writing is also the story of what we have read and read now, of the quality of our readings; in the end a good story is the one written from the bottom of our life, from the core of our relations with the others, from the top of the books we have liked.

Cities

One morning, - it was summer, a very hot Neapolitan summer, I was eleven – two teenagers, older friends we play games with, silent lovers, invited my sister and I out for ice cream. Our mother had absolutely forbidden us to leave the courtyard of the building where we were living. We were instead tempted by the ice cream, the possible love, and so we decided to disobey. Disobedience was followed by disobedience. Not only did we go to the bar at the end of the street, but carried by the pleasure of being romantic women, we went further down, till the gardens in Cavour Place, till the Museum.

Suddenly it became dark. It started raining, thunder and lighting, lashing rain pouring on us and running in torrents towards the manholes. Our companions looked for shelter, my sister and I didn't, as I imagined my mother nervously calling us from the balcony.

We felt abandoned in the rain and we ran in the lashing heavy water. I held my sister's hand, yelling to hurry up, we were soaked with rain; my heart was bouncing. It was a long hyper hectic time of chaos. Our friends had left us to our destiny, the house we were running to was certainly a place of punishment, anything could happen to us. At that moment for the first time I noticed the city. I felt it on my shoulders, under my

shoes, it ran with us, it panted with its dirty breath, it shouted mad horns; it was strange and known at the same time, limited and immense, dangerous and exciting, I recognized it by getting lost into it.

I kept this image. Since that time, each city has existed only if it abruptly enters the blood that moves legs and blinds eyes. I took the wrong turn many times not because I didn't know the way home but because the known way also felt my anxiety and presented wrong turns to me; these wrong turns were also the desire to make a mistake, a possibility to escape from my mother, never going home but wickedly melting myself along its paths, all in my secret thoughts. I had to stop, tugging at my sister not to run away, grasping again at the magic orientation thread, tying one path to the other, making tight knots so the paths could settle down and I could find the way home. When our mother realized we were alive, she was moved but then, exactly for this reason, she punished us with a serving spoon.

I want to try to answer your question on Delia's and Olga's cities starting exactly from that run in the rain. I left Naples very early; I had to live in different and distant places. I rarely got on well with the cities where I lived and now all of them appear only prosthetic with opposite effects on me: they are always dead and strange matter for me, or they are body on body, active parts of what you feel. It is only in this second case that, in good and in bad, cities are important to me. The others are only insignificant topographies. Even if they have great, evocative names and fascinating traces of a past, they are not able to inspire me, not even as a tourist; I have a poor interest for that kind of Touring Club-guide tourism. Since that experience of my late childhood, for me the real

model of metropolitan involvement is Naples; it presses on me and confuses me while I run in the storm.

I have to tell you though, that the epilogue of that run is essential to me. What I mean is the process of calming down, of regaining sight and hearing, of seeing the city as if I had redesigned it with my anxieties and my pleasures. I mean the use of a thread that reconnects places fragmented by emotions and allows the loosing of the self and also the power of doing it.

On this subject there is a Walter Benjamin's paragraph I very much love. I find all that I need in it: the descent towards Mothers of an urban place lived through a childish eye; the city-labyrinth, the role of love, the ugly housekeeper, the rain falling on childhood. I refer to *Berlin Childhood around 1900*'s opening chapter called "the Zoological garden."

It is useless to start talking now about Benjamin's gaze, an extraordinary gaze made of eyeballs, pupils in all their spherical surface and so able to see not only the front, the outside, or the after that is getting ready but the front-back, the inside-outside, the before-after, with no progressive order. I want instead to underline the wonderful incipit that says: "Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. "[106]

To learn how to lose one's way around a city: hear the street names like the snapping of dry twigs, like mountain gorges that reflect the times of day. Benjamin talks about it with an anomalous style, an impetuous writing that tries to get to *the difficult to say*, to what is at the bottom and what is barely visible. When does the city become the city of losing one's way? Where does the labyrinth originate? When do you train in the

[106] Translation's note: this is the original text from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2006, 53

art of losing? He writes: "This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks. No, not the first, for there was one earlier that has outlasted the others. The way into this labyrinth, which was not without its Ariadne, led over the Bendler Bridge, whose gentle arch became my first hillside."[107]

This blotting fast writing is beautiful, this withdrawing to ink traces of a few lines on the absorbent papers of childhood, in search of the primary labyrinth. Does the intuition of the art of loosing one's way around a city reside in those blotting papers? No, it doesn't, the whirlpool pulls downwards, there still is a *before* that resides on the scribbles of the blotting sheets. We need to withdraw. The original urban labyrinth is in childhood. It is the labyrinth the child Benjamin went around in the form of the zoological garden in Berlin, that mysterious place where "must have lain the couch of that Ariadne in whose proximity I first experienced what only later I had a word for: love. Unfortunately, the "Fräulein" intervenes at its earliest budding to overspread her icy shadow. And so this park, which, unlike every other, seemed open to children, was for me, as a rule, distorted by difficulties and impracticabilities."[108]

The primary labyrinth is in the path of the childish gaze that wanders along the mystery outside his home, far from his guardians, and for the first time he met love. It is the miserable and untangleable proved by the Benjamin child when the severe shadow of his governess overcasts his Ariadne upsetting the apparition (there is no city-labyrinth without a Pasifae who creates the monster-Minotaur, without Ariadne and love). The adult Benjamin will forever dream that getting lost began in passing through the Blender

[107] Walter Benjamin 54
[108] Translator's note: Benjamin's original version , 54-55.

Bridge, and will look for the thread to go back to that experience and transform it into a known and learnable art.

Obviously, we don't know anything about Benjamin's Ariadne; he doesn't tell us about her but about a young Theseus's childhood from Berlin: it is obvious that it's like this. It's unforgettable for me, though, the brief child's image, immediately covered by the severe shadow of another woman, the housekeeper-mother-monster. If Theseus is blocked by the inability of finding his way, it is Ariadne who holds the art of getting lost: she is the one who holds the thread to control the getting lost. Since I was a child, I have loved that myth. I don't exclude that that day in Naples, in the storm, I thought of Ariadne, and I don't exclude that many years later I thought of her when talking about Delia who wanders along the city getting lost in her childhood. When I was a high school student hardworking and distracted, I generally dreamt of leading Theseus in killing the beast who was my relative, of rescuing the hero, of leaving for him the city-prison and my own ugly family, of sailing for another city, of realizing how ingrate he was beneath the appearance of a nice guy with curly hair, of eventually getting vindictive and disorderly joys, of perdition with Dionysus, a perdition that I wished more at fifteen than I have ever really wished as an adult.

There is always something in myths that moves your soul. Years ago, when I was older and with another mindset, I returned to Naples for a few months, I had some problems: I retook some roads I used to take as a young girl, even the one I took with my sister during the storm. I rediscovered the anguish of that breathless run, but also the pleasant image of a city that belonged to me and nobody else, the hostile and seductive city I had seized for the first time that distant day. The image of the labyrinth as an

ordinary space came back to me, a known space that suddenly becomes upset with you in a big emotion. I got some books (even that huge and seducing chaotic Graves' *Greek Myths*) as I wanted to understand if myths could have helped me in telling, from a distance, a story of impatience, escape, of falling in love and of abandonment. This is not Olga's abandonment as this will come much later when I understood that to write better you need to do the opposite told by manuals: you need to get closer, to reduce the distance, erase it and feel the living bodies' bouncing veins on the page.

I was influenced by a variation in Ariadne's story. It is the story of this pregnant woman from Crete, consumed by seasickness, who Theseus let disembark at Amatonte[Naxos] fearing her miscarriage. She has just landed when a strong wind forced the hero's fleet to sail away. Ariadne is desperate, she is close to labour, and she suffers from her lover's abandonment. The women of Amatonte intervene and to comfort her, they write, in turn, love letters pretending to be Theseus's. The lie lasts till Ariadne dies in childbirth.

During those months in Naples I briefly worked on this story. I specifically invented a sort of modern city in Campania, a new Amatonte that looked like a small town along the Amalfi coast. It was a city of female friendship and solidarity, but free in thoughts and warless. I imagined a community of modern women who wrote to the modern Ariadne, the abandoned foreign woman, comforting love letters pretending to be the betraying lover. I was very attracted by the possibility to tell how women dream of being loved , that's why I focused on four points: the female effort to enter a man's head and words; women collaborating - a real close working group – to pretend to have a physical and lexical male constitution; the questioning, on the contrary, of oneself on

what one would have loved to hear from the man in love; the research-confession of what they would have told Ariadne if, as it was happening to some of them among several contradictions, they would have fallen madly in love with her.

I remember that I liked a lot imagining the agitated debate that preceded the writing of the letters. When I really started writing them, everything became complicated, and at the end, they seemed a vain effort to me; I wrote two letters and then I stopped. Visibly the structure was weak and the letters tended to describe an ideal man whose existence no Ariadne, desperate for the abandonment, would have ever believed, especially today; the city was too perfect, the female community, even in its liveliness, appeared too "corny" in its affections and so fake. No, one can and should have to write about the women-ruling cities as city-labyrinths, places of our complex and contradictory feelings, where the Beast lies in ambush and it is dangerous to get lost without having first learnt how to do it.

The problem is, and I expand a little the topic of your question, that it is hard to imagine which polis women could build and do it in their image. Where is the model-image similar to certain female traits? As far as I know, for women, the city always belongs to someone else, even when it is their native city. It is true that, for quite some time, some female representatives have been actively participating in the polis management, but only on condition that, begging immediately, they don't take possession of it or try seriously to reinvent it. The one who tries is unhappy, and leaves behind bitter words or she adjusts words already tested by the current politics.

Obviously, the female city is not to be built soon, nor has it real words. To find them, we should descend beyond the scribbles of our absorbent sheets, inside the

labyrinth of our childhood, in the irredentism of frantumaglia of our present and past. This is a difficult task. The mythical heroines themselves are, in general, solitary women, individuals who don't belong to anything but that are looking for a small fragile supremacy which, when gained is also repaid with shame and their own life. They often do acts that divert from the male order; sometimes they rebel against the laws of their native city. It is rare that they find a city of their own. Only once, if I remember well now, a woman decides to plan her polis, run its construction, and be "dux femina facti." Obviously, I am dealing with Dido, a character I have only partially loved for quite a long time.

When I was a teenager, her suicide had annoyed me. At high school, I was fascinated by the story and not by what was fully described by Virgil, but by what Virgil mentioned slightly: the history of bloodshed the woman had in her past, her husband killed by her brother, the escape from Tyre, the agility she showed in Africa, the way she got the land on which later, together with her sister, she founded a new city. At that time, I liked runaway women. For Dido, I had ready homemade suggestion on how I would have shaped her. At this point I need to tell you that my mother was a dressmaker for a long period of her life, and this accounts for me. She could do everything with needle, thread, scissor and fabrics. She adjusted old clothes making new ones: she sewed, unstitched, widened, took in, and she made tears invisible with clever stitching. As I had grown up in the middle of that cut and sew, I was soon convinced of the way Dido had deceived the Getuli's King. Iarba had told her scornfully: I will give you as much land as there is on a bull's skin. A little, a very little bit, an ironic male scorn. The king, I was sure, as he was also Ammone's son, must have thought that even if one had

reduced the bull's skin into strips, it would have never encircled sufficient land to build a city on it. But I have seen the blonde Dido in exactly the same curled up position of my mother while she was working, beautiful, with her black hair in a nice hairstyle, the agile hands marked by needle and scissor wounds, and I had understood that the story was plausible. Dido had spent the whole night (at night people do decisive deeds) curled up to reduce the beast's skin into almost invisible strips that she sewed together so that the seam could hardly be seen; a very long Ariadne's thread, an animal skin ball to unroll to surround a huge piece of Africa's land and, at the same time, the limits of a new city. This seemed true to me about her and moved me.

Even years later, at university, I didn't like everything about Dido; I preferred the female who was leading a big enterprise, the female who was directing the construction of the huge walls and the castle of the new Carthage. I was moved especially when Virgil made her appear while, in the temple to Giunone, the pious Enaeas was admiring a bas relief that represented an angry Pentesilea at war. I have always got very upset by those stories that during a happy scene can introduce an imperceptible sign of future troubles and they cut your breath off with the shadow of an abrupt change of destiny. Dido appeared beautiful for the first time, surrounded by young admirers, happily active and vigil in supervising the constructions in the city; I, student-reader-translator, who already knew what would have happened, since that moment felt pain at each word. I was sorry for that woman who, at the height of her female identity, would have been consumed by angry love: from happy –*laeta*, the right adjective for her- she would have become angry – *furens*- as the other female losing model, Pentesilea. I was sorry for her and the city that was showing promising. Only when I read Virgil's verses again to help

me in writing Olga's story, did I suddenly like Dido again in every instance. I have to say, I liked Eneas too, his boring pietas suddenly did not seem so formal: today's men are much like him, pious of that same uncertain ferocious pietas. This time I felt the development of the story to be true and excruciating; the rejection I felt when I was a young girl did not occur. What really struck me more was Virgil's use of the city. Carthage is not a background, an urban passage for characters and facts. Carthage is what it isn't yet but what it is becoming, a work in progress matter, a rock that, from time to time, is shaken by the internal movement of the two characters. It is not a case that Eneas, even before admiring the beautiful Dido, admires how feverish the construction works are, how the walls, the castle, the port, the theatre and the columns are rising. His first comment is a sigh: how lucky are the Phoenicians, their walls are already rising. He puts his feeling as a founder in those walls: they represent, at the same time, the memory of the destroyed motherland and the hope-nostalgia for a future city and the wish of a nomad to settle down in the centre of the foreign city that is also a beautiful woman to possess.

Cities are like this, rocks that are suddenly made alive by our emotions, our desires, as it is visible in the relationship between Carthage and Dido. The feverish works are under the guide of this woman escaped from the horror of Tyre, another city that was a long offense for her, a city where her brother killed his brother in law, and where each feeling has been for ever polluted by the wish of killing. The queen does not want to repeat Tyre and organizes the big urban construction site according to law and justice. She welcomes the stranger exile, and she has managed that art would represent in Giunone's temple walls the horrors of the war and the murder, a sort of memento.

Furthermore, she is a woman at the height of her beauty as the young people who crowd around tell her. It is clear that Carthage under her rule tries to become, among several troubles, not a cage for the Beast but a polis of love.

Then passion bursts out, it absorbs any energy and transforms itself into mad love. The city also soon reacts: what has started is stopped and work is interrupted. Rocks wait to decide their destiny, like Dido does. If the love between Dido and Enea happily occurs becoming a lasting joyful understanding, Cathago would enjoy the energy, works would resume, the rock would hold the positive feeling of human beings who are shaping it. Eneas, instead, abandons the woman, and Dido, from being happy, becomes furious. The past joins the future, Tyre virtually joins Carthage, each road becomes a labyrinth, a place of getting lost without art, and the bloodstream Dido left behind returns to stain the new city. The time for incompleteness is over. In Dido's words while dying, Carthage is suddenly the city of hate and revenge, so that the woman's extreme curse definitely leaves aside the hypothesis of a fair polis: her scream of love is *nullus amor populis nec foedera sunto*.

This is the result of getting lost in the urban labyrinth with no art or thread: no love, no deal. Virgil's connection between love and constitution in the civilian cohabitation is very meaningful. The wars between Rome and Carthage certainly had economic and political reasons not Eneas' abandonment of Dido, not the removal of love that is only a literary reason. But why *only?* As everybody who loves literature, I believe that literary reasons tell more than political and economic reasons; they actually get to the bottom of political and economic reasons. I am actually one of those who think that the exile of love from the cities leaves space for the economic and political overpowering.

The realism of destruction will make the cohabitation deals temporary, truces will be brief and weapons return and there is an eagerness to raze things to the ground as long as a widespread culture of love is not established – I mean solidarity, respect, and inclination for a good life for all, in other words the antidote against violence and against the easy inclination for the destruction of enemies.

So, no love among people, no deals: the two things go together. A line says more than a thousand great readings and one doesn't have to be surprised. Who writes stories knows that literary reasons are not moths with transparent wings. They have flesh and blood, complex passions and feelings: poetry is searching inside with unpredictable movements. Dido is nourished with sweat and saliva and she is not a caramel layer on top of a crème brûlée. She can curse the person she still loves and she can kill herself with her lover's gift.

As I was saying, when I was young I detested that suicide. I thought that as women we go to the labyrinths with the magic thread to control the getting lost. I am convinced, however, that the mistake of each city is at the bottom, in its claiming city of love with no possibility of labyrinths, nor painful or complicated, space of happiness with no violence lying in ambush. Even a possible female city, a future that will redeem the past, runs the risk of not knowing how to handle itself. It is a shortcut to put into parentheses the terrible in women, and think about ourselves as only organisms with good feelings and as skilful masters of kindness. Maybe this is useful to give oneself strength to grow in politics, but who does literature need to make hostility, loathing and rage visible, together with generous feelings. This is our duty, we need to dig inside, tell

about them from a close distance, feel that they exist, with or without Eneas, with or without Theseus.

I don't like thinking, as often one tends to do, that the terrible deeds of the mythical heroines are the result of a male fraudulent operation, of a patriarchal conspiracy: at the end it is like attributing women a defect of humanity and this is not useful. We need to learn to talk about our complexity with pride, of how it is part of our citizenship in joy and rage. To do so, we need to learn the art of getting lost in the painful and in the complicated: there is no Ariadne who doesn't have a troubling love somewhere, or the beloved mother's imago who gives births to suicidal dolls and Minotaur.

Listen to ourselves, see ourselves. In the metropolitan labyrinths, we sometimes fearlessly ask burial for our brother, sometimes we cooperate in the stepbrother's murder to flee with the murderer, in some cases we kill our children, and more often we say terrible curses before falling victims of the rage. The story of Virgil's Carthage describes as well as the polis, alive with the feelings of its female citizens. It also describes what happens when love – thread to get lost and to find oneself again – is forbidden; breath becomes of fire and the civil cohabitation deal is cancelled.

But, that's it, what matters is to try and retry to cut the city perimeter on ourself with needle and thread. When I was a hardworking student, I was not bored to spend the winter afternoons on Virgil's Eneide. It was nice to read about the queen on the throne while fairly directing the huge construction site, a rare occasion to dream about a female city founder. I looked for different endings than the one that sees the queen stabbing herself with the sword given by Eneas. I imagined she would fight angers, find a new

love, learn the art of entering and recovering from the getting lost. Sometimes I got up and went to the window, the cold feet didn't allow me to keep studying. When it comes to my mind, Naples is often a cold city under the storm.

Female Clothes

I know that I run the risk of exaggerating, but to be able to talk about clothes and make up as you have asked me, I need to tell you again something about my mother.

Obviously for me her work as a dressmaker started in the fabric shops. I liked going with her a lot. I looked enchanted at the shop assistant – or the owner himself if the shop did not have any shop assistants – while he moved with a sort of happiness in his gestures. He took the rectangular forms of the fabric from the shelves and without waiting on them touching the counter, he had already opened them up on a wave towards my mother, making the block of fabric start, jump and roll on itself as if it were alive. She touched the fabric rubbing a hem between her thumb and her index and in the meantime looked in front of her, as if not looking at the fabric would emphasize the fingers sensibility. I smelled the scent of new fabric, a bitter scent that was normally stale in the shop but that the quick enrolling of the fabric had breathed straight into my face. I was beside my mother, arriving with my head at her waist, her dress fabric almost touching me. I looked at the fabrics that piled on the counter, and I felt that she was choosing the right one to do its spell. It was a spell that I knew well and that always enchanted me. The new fabric she was going to buy would be marked with chalk, the scissor would cut it, and frayed shreds would cover the floor. With pins, needles and threads, my mother would give it a shape, the exact shape of a body; she was able to do

bodies of fabric. The new fabric smell would spread for the last time, a stranger and wild smell that before has been tamed in our home, would be lost.

It always happened like that. The same dress she was wearing now and that had her smell on, I remembered exactly that, once it was a shop fabric. When she decided to buy it, she nicely told the shop assistant the amount of meters she needed. The shop assistant did some big and quick gestures that had the fabric roll along a short section of the counter edge. To that dance, a precise hit with the scissors, a neat tear, a lacerating gust of another bitter smell had followed. I was an expert, the art of clothes started there, and it stopped on my parent's bed. The oldest memory I have of a just finished dress – the one I believe is at least the oldest – is of a black dress or maybe dark blue, stretched out on the matrimonial bed red duvet. My mother put the dresses just ironed there, she used to say that there were no other suitable places in the house to prevent them creasing. It was forbidden for us to enter that room when there were dresses ready for delivery. I, however, must have entered once, I can not recollect the exact day: I certainly was not very young. Certainly, it was a phase during which I felt sudden flushes on my back, presence behind me even if there was nobody in the room, all mysterious things that, however, did not upset me, actually I was happy they were happening as I could tell them to my sisters who instead were afraid of that. I opened the door, I looked into the room. The dress was stretched out on the centre of the bed, the narrow waist, the wide opened sleeves, the skirt shaped in a trapezium. Nothing happened but a sudden breath puffed out the dress, as brief a movement as for a breath. After, a skirt hem was out of place, slightly lifted. I was afraid my mother would have blamed me, as she usually did for everything. So I went to lower that hem. But, with no reason, I lifted it more and I

looked under the dress. There was a naked woman body with cut off legs, hands, head, a purple body but with no blood: a body of living matter with no veins. I moved back and exited the room. I was scolded when she found out – and screamed at because she was already very nervous – that the dress was in a terrible mess.

I have always felt that dresses are not empty as opposed to human beings who some times appear empty, isolated, and terribly lost. During my childhood I wore my mother's dresses. I found beautiful and prestigious women in them, but dead. So I entered them, I fit them on me and started their adventures. They all had my mother's smell, I thought I could also have it. They didn't have husbands but many lovers. I deeply felt their pleasures; their adventurous bodies melted into mine. As soon as I felt the fabric on my breast and on my legs, it warmed up my stomach and my fantasies. They were fabrics I knew very well as for a long time they had been in my mother's hands, among her fingers, on her legs.

When I was young, I saw the dress coming to life, before my mother stopped being a dressmaker. She never taught me anything about her job; only during a certain period she made me help her to unthread a tacking, or she taught me to give a stitch she called cross stitch or another that was called a butterfly. But I keep her job in my[mind] eyes, especially her gestures; the things that enchanted and worried me, an enchantment mixed with a little fear. I didn't like the fabric to be cut, the cut gave me a sense of discomfort, I was disgusted by the fragments of the shredded fabric that fell on the floor under the table. When I learnt the expression "to cut the dress on someone," I loaded it with that ambiguous meaning from my childhood. Was the fabric shaped with scissors

clipped on the living body to cover it? Or was the living body stripped naked by the cuts made by the scissors? I wavered between these two fantasies and looked at my mother.

She really cut the dress on someone, and sometimes she did it exactly as Lucia Maglietta does in Mario Martone's film: cutting and sewing went with chatting, smiling and laughing, malicious gossiping and telling; the pleasure of telling stories among women about other women, stories about customers and neighbors. In the meantime, words fell on the cloth filling it; they embodied in the women I would have later worn. Mrs Caldaro, for example, was a lawyer's wife: to try on her future dress, she would get undressed leaving a sad smell of disease in our house. She wore it full of tears, the dress barely standing with needles and the tacking white thread. In the meantime she told stories about herself and cried. My mother listened to her and I as well; those stories upset me and I would have told words of comfort. In general my mother would intervene with her own story of comfort, a story similar to Mrs Caldaro's one, a story she had heard and that had a happy ending. The lady listened but she could not believe it, she doubted that her story would have had a happy ending also; she felt very unfortunate and cried. When she left and the dress lay on the table of the dining room, I felt it – so signed, so hit by the needles, because of her words of pain, for their evil touch – a woman's body exhausted by her own events, with no head, no legs, no arms and hands.

Mrs Caldaro's dress was for parties and balls; my mother sewed it, unstitched and re-sewed it, she gave it stitches and stitches. I was afraid of the needle, but I also liked it for the harmony of the seam it leaves behind as in a trail. My mother pricked the fabric with quick and agile gestures. She stayed concentrated on the chair, curled up, the dress to sew on her knees. Sometimes she had me thread the needle, if I insisted. I had to

moisten the thread top by putting it into my mouth, then I had to tighten and twist the saliva-wet part with my tongue and my lips, eventually I had to pass the ready thread through the eye. It was beautiful to succeed the first time, while my mother praised me, but if I did not succeed it was equally beautiful. She took the thread again, put the top between her lips and gave it back to me to let me try again. Sometimes I twisted the wet thread between my thumb and my index finger to make it taut and pointed it as a needle.

What has really counted for me is the memory of the confident way in which my mother's hands and fingers passed the needle and the thread in the fabric and they slightly pulled, and then returned to sink the needle point. That pricking, passing, pulling was done in such a quick and expert manner, it moved to be so straight with such a precision that , still today, it comes back into my mind for every well executed operation, and I am not happy that I don't remember the vocabulary she used any more. She talked of strings, of backstitch, certainly of chain stitch, of embroidery stitch, the rest of the words have faded; she did not want me to keep them, she wished me to learn something else. So, what has remained is especially her hand, with the nails that could not grow: it was as if they would bend forward, and the swollen blue veins on her back and the rough fingertips, pricked and re-picked, almost never protected by the thimble.

It was that sewing that enchanted me more than the cutting. The moving art of that hand putting together the pieces of fabric, making the stitches invisible; the shredded fabric resumed a soft continuity, a new compactness, it became dress, a female body form, skin on skin, an organism that lay on her lap and at times slipped down to her feet, that was as excited as her hands and ready to go to the singer treadle. It was a coming and going that seemed like a dance, her hand passed the needle, her mouth bit the thread,

her bust moved on the chair, turning to the sewing machine, her feet, big and of strong bone structure, leant on the treadle and started the singer needle movement, a quick movement along with a sound similar to rolling metal.

It seemed as if the machine was running but it was not. The big wheel below made the small one roll in the upper part. The spool on the pivot swirled, spools of constantly different colors; I saw swirls of blue, green, red, brown, black, pirouettes made by my mother's feet. The thread stretched till the machine edge and then fell down in the needle that in the meantime leaped rapidly on the shuttle like an athlete with the cord, and disappeared in the fabric leaving behind a thick stitching that my mother accompanied with her hands.

I looked; there was a moment I didn't want to miss. It was when the thread diminished on the spool, it diminished to a thin cover and eventually unrolled completely, leaving a tail that also disappeared, and leaving the naked spool to roll for some more swings on the pivot, till it stopped revealing its true color, with no seduction. It was a moment that made me sad. I took the spool as if it were a corpse, I felt life was ended for it, it gave everything it had to, no more joyful swirls of color. Now, the thread was all in Mrs Caldaro's dress, a passage of energy and the dress was ready for the final touch to the stitching with the hot iron, hot touches, feverish caress before lying down on the bedroom and then being body on the lady's body, lawyer's wife, taking on itself her smell of disease, perhaps of her desperation.

My mother soon stopped making dresses for other women and started making them only for her daughters, her relatives, some neighbors, and especially for herself. When I was young I liked when my mother made me a dress. I liked when she measured

me, she came very close, I felt her smell, her breath on my face. The dresses she made me always appeared like dresses done for games; even those that she cut for herself had a playful look. I remember when she took off the shabby dressing gown and she tried the unfinished dress in front of the mirror or she had some neighbors to try it on to check if there were any faults. What pleasure I felt in her dresses, their smell of creams, lipsticks, a smell of sugared almonds. I secretly tried them on, I put on her hats, her shoes and if she found it out, she wouldn't get mad but she would let me do it. Actually, she looked at me with her sad smile, her body curled up on the sewing, the shabby aspect.

But already at that time, I mean at the times of the closet I told you about, those dresses gave me a sense of anxiety, they had a poison like Ness's shirt. With the years, her ability to sew started to weigh heavy on me. In the early adolescence already, I detested that ability; I was ashamed to go around with the dresses made by her. I would have liked normal dresses that would have made me look like the others. In her dresses, there was an excess, something more eccentric that showed, especially in those she made for herself.

She copied them from the cinema actresses' ones, the princesses', the fashion designer's models. But she had the gift to make them better; they appeared to have more energy on her. My mother has never cut a dress on her that did not make her beautiful. While at home she appeared a shabby bundle on a chair, every time she went out, she would give her body the magnificence of an astounding appearance, the beauty in films of summer nights at the beach. She was a shy woman, but in that appearance she showed a certain boldness, a fantasy that scared and humiliated me. I hated her dressing up, when she went out, I felt my father's anxiety, other men's admiration, their overly

excited talking, the effort of cheerfulness to please her, the envy and the offence for how she could make herself beautiful. I was embarrassed by the effect my mother caused in a tram, in the funicular railway, on the street, in shops, or at the cinema. Her meticulous dressing up to go out with her husband or by herself gave me the idea that it hid a desperate disgrace, and I felt shame and pity for her. When in the dresses she made for herself, she spread around her all the light she was able to, that showing made me suffer because in seeing her so dressed up I found her to be like a badly grown up child, an adult woman mortified by the ridiculous. In those amazing dresses I felt at the same time seduction, laughter and death. That's why I felt a mute anger, a wish in my hands to ruin her and myself, and then to erase that fake appearance of a diva's daughter, a queen's offspring, she tried to give me by sewing night and day. I wanted her in her domestic clothes, that was my mother, even if I was pleased of her extreme/romantic beauty. I wanted her without her sewing inspiration. When I succeeded in escaping the dresses she made me, I reacted and wished to stop that appearance of nice daughter in special offer.

When I was young, I detested the female traits. I was annoyed and humiliated by dressing up, the wish of doing it, the desire to wear a dress that fitted me well, the idea itself of *a dress that fits you*. I was afraid that somebody might think that I dressed up in that way to please him and laugh behind my back for the effort I did, the time spent on that, and might boast about it saying: she did it for me. That is why I hid myself behind huge blouses, two-size bigger sweaters, and big jeans. I wanted to totally erase the idea of nice clothes inherited by my mother and wear casual clothes, not being like her who wore elegant clothes despite the misery of her adult life.

I wanted to be dressed *sanfasò* [with no style], a word she used when she saw me going out. It was the dialect version of the French *sans façon* that she pronounced with repulsion, a word she needed to say: you don't have to be and live like this.

Some time I felt shabby, as if I were all *sanfasò*, and I suffered for that. But I was often courted despite the shabby aspect and then I felt as if I had a sort of permanent dress, a nice dress that was visible beyond the jeans and the huge blouses. I believe that the intense game of clothes in *Troubling Love* moves from this sensation. Delia, a mature and emancipated woman, packed in cuirassed dresses for her blocked body, was almost crushed by the dresses her mother wanted to give her; she is possessed by their dark origin and she will descend to hell to find Amalia's blue dress and find the courage to wear it. Also Olga's reaction to her daughter Ilaria's disguise comes from the same emotions. But it is difficult to say what eventually enters books, as sometimes, it is too easy. I gave Delia a dream that consciously added many anxieties connected to dresses, and to my mother's job as a dressmaker. This passage is unpublished also and I write it here for you.

"When I was young I had a dream that I have never stopped having. It is worthless to tell it in details as they change all the time.

The strangest things in the most different situations occurred in the dream, but then always came the moment I was in front of a man and I had to get undressed. I didn't want to but he was there, wouldn't go anywhere and looked at me amused, waiting. Then I tried to get undressed slowly, but my clothes did not fall off: it was as if they were drawn on my skin. The man started laughing, laughing uproariously, I got upset and felt a violent surge of jealousy; I felt I was jealous of him, he certainly had another woman.

In the attempt of holding him by pleasing him, I grasped my breast with both hands and opened it, I opened my own body as it were a dressing gown. I did not feel pain, I only saw another woman alive inside of me and I suddenly understood it was only another woman's dress, a stranger. I could not stand that, my jealousy rising. I was then jealous of that woman I had found inside of me, I tried to hit her in every way, to grasp her, I wanted to kill her. But there was an unfillable distance between her and myself, I could not even touch her and the laugh continued, an uncontrollable laugh. In front of me, however, looking straight at me was not the man but my mother and I was not surprised, it seemed she had always been there.

When I woke up, even if I knew very well it was only a dream, I was angry and I felt disgust and a wish to hurt."

Delia's dream was partially invented but you feel that it moved from that real worry from the adolescence. What was the secret dress men saw on me? How did I wear it? If I were able to take it off would I become another? What kind?

Unfortunately it is difficult to tell dreams, as soon as you write them they oblige you to invent, order, and they become false. Especially in novels, they are so clearly functional to the psychological necessities of the character that their artificial nature becomes unbearable. But sometime nightmares take the right forms in a few lines. Of all the literary clothes I know, the one that better expresses the emotional condition I have experienced when I was young, is the very female Harey's dress, the heroine of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris,* semblance of suicidal woman for love, male word become female. I quote a paragraph, the protagonist Chris is talking:

"Harey, I need to go," I said. "If you really want, come with me."

"All right."

She immediately got up.

"Why are you bare foot?" I asked approaching the wardrobe and choosing two colored overalls, one for me and one for her.

"I don't know. I must have lost the shoes somewhere…," she answered uncertain.

I pretended not to have heard. "You won't be able to wear this over your dress. You have to take it off."

"The overalls..? For what?" she asked trying to take the dress off. But something strange happened: it was impossible to take it off, it didn't have any buttons. The red buttons on the front were only decorative. There was no kind of fasteners, no zips or others. Harey smiled embarrassed.

Harey's smile moves me, in the book each moment about Harey moves me. But that dress that cannot be taken off and so you don't know how it was put on, frightens and attracts me. Chris, the novel hero, two lines after takes a sort of chisel and cuts the woman's dress from the neckline, so that she can finally take it off and wear the overalls that "are a little bigger." But the quick male manners, that surgical decisive act have not pleased me. For me, Harey's dress hides an identical other underneath, and then another one and another one and no external act can solve the problem. Besides, Lem makes Harey a ghost that comes back, comes always back with an irrepressible energy wearing always the same dress. To get her undressed, Chris needs to cut the dress over again. If Harey's ghost returned thousands of times, it would always wear the same dress and Chris, by cutting, in the Solaris station room would have thousands of identical dresses, in order words one single female dress with thousand of reflexes. What to do with one

dress like this? One has to learn how to take it off and not to die for it? One has to accept the idea that it is the dress of our death as women and any attempt of resurrection only proposes it again to us as a symbol of our mortifying? The books' paragraphs that influence us are rewritten by us according to our needs.

For example, still talking about dresses, when I was young, I put something about me in Alba de Céspedes's *Dalla parte di lei*. I am dealing in particular with the first 150 pages: in there, there is the story of a mother-daughter relationship, and more generally, a memorable catalogue of relationships among women. I was sixteen when I read those pages for the first time. I loved many things, I didn't understand others, other things annoyed me. What counts is the struggling reading I had, I could not seriously identify myself with the young Alessandra, the narrating *I*. I was certainly very moved by the relationship with her mother Eleonora, a pianist oppressed by a vulgar husband. I certainly recognized myself in those parts in which Alessandra told of her strong relationship with her mother, but I was annoyed by her absolute approval to Eleonora's fascination for the musician Hervey: I would say that Alessandra's approval appeared too "corny" and improbable and it made me angry; I would have fought my mother's hypothetical love affair with all my strength, the single suspect made me furious and even more jealous than her certain love for my father. In other words, I didn't understand, I had the impression to know more about Eleonora than her daughter could realize. The pages on the dress prepared for the concert with Hervey mark the difference between me, the reader, and the narrating *I*. They appear passionate and today still I love them a lot, an important part of a paragraph that now seems of great literary intelligence.

If you don't mind, let's have a look at that dress story. Eleonora is very talented but, oppressed by her role as a vulgar man's wife, is reduced to the shabby role of a very sensitive woman without love. Her mother also, Alessandra's grandmother, had a history of oppression: Austrian, talented actress, married an Italian artilleryman and had to close the veils and the feathers of her dresses as Giulietta and Ophelia in a truck: she also was doomed to give up her talent. But now Eleonora, close to forty years, going from home to home to give piano lessons, ends up in a rich house to teach a small girl named Arletta, where she meets the girl's brother, the mysterious musician Hervey and falls in love with him. Love gives her back her talent, her wish to live, her artistic ambition so that she decides to have a concert with Hervey. It is at that point that there is the issue of the dress. With which dress will Eleonora play in the concert of her liberation, in Arletta's and Hervey's rich house?

When I was an adolescent reader I was anxious at every line. I liked that love was so important in that book. I felt it was true, one can not live without love but, in the meantime, I felt that there was something that did not work. I was anguished by Eleonora's clothes in her wardrobe; I acknowledged in them something I knew. "They were all of a neutral color," de Céspedes wrote, giving voice to Alessandra: "Havana brown, grey, two or three were of neutral silk made sadden by a white lace collar: clothes suitable for an elderly woman….the clothes hung floppy from the hangers. I said slowly: "Mom, they all seem like dead women."

This clothes' image of dead women hanging from the hangers must have agreed with my secret feeling about clothes; I have often used it, I still use it. And there was also another one, a couple of pages before, that I immediately added to my vocabulary

and it referred to Eleonora's evanescent body in love: "she was so slim that it seemed to be only a little breath inside the dress." How true was that dress animated only by warm breath. I read, I read eagerly to see how it would have ended. Which dress would Eleonora have worn? She jumped up, went to the chest of drawers and took a big box. Her daughter Alessandra's eyes followed her mother: "The box was closed by very old strings: her mother suddenly broke them. Once she lifted the lid, pink and blue veils, feathers and satin ribbons appeared. I didn't think she had such a treasure: so I looked at her amazed and she turned round and looked at her mother's portrait. I understood that they were Giulietta's and Ophelia's veils and I touched those veils with devotion. 'How could we adjust them?' she asked doubtful". I trembled. The dress's liberation came through a maternal line: the stage clothes of Eleonora's actress mother, thanks to a noisy neighbor's sewing ability, become clothes for a concert, disguised to appear beautiful to Hervey. Eleonora put aside the neutral clothes of a wife and used the blue veils to make herself a dress of a woman in love, of a lover. I was anxious, I could not understand Alessandra's joyful behavior. I read and felt that things wouldn't go well, I was surprised that the sixteen year old girl – my own age – didn't even suspect it. No, I was not as joyfully blind as she was. I perceived Eleonora's tragedy. I felt that the passage from neutral clothes to colored ones wouldn't have improved her condition. Actually, when Alessandra told Fulvia, the neighbor-dressmaker: "We need to make a dress for my mother with Ophelia's veils!", I was sure that tragedy was close. The new dress with the old stage fabrics wouldn't have saved Eleonora. It was obvious that Alessandra's mother would have killed herself, would have certainly drowned.

That was in fact what would have happened: Alessandra didn't understand, I did. I perceived the need to offer one's beauty to the loved man not as a liberation but as something sinister. Eleonora said, showing her half naked body to her daughter's and neighbor's gaze: "Every time I arrive and he looks at me, I want to be beautiful like a woman in a painting." The passage continued in this way in Alessandra's words: "She got up, rushed to hug Lydia, and then Fulvia and then me, went quickly to the mirror and there she stopped inspecting herself. 'Make me beautiful,' she said holding her hands tight on her heart. 'Make me beautiful.'"

Make me beautiful. I cried so much over those words. I kept in my memory the sentence not as a living cry but as a dead one. Some time has passed now, many things have changed but that need that de Céspedes' Eleonora expresses still seems desperate and so meaningful. Let's go back to the passages as I felt them during the old first reading, as I still feel them now. Eleonora, because of the drive for love, decides to take off her clothes of punishment and suffering. But the only alternative dress she found is the stage dress inherited by her mother, the female body dress accentuated and displayed. The dressmaker Flavia, cut it for her and she adjusted it to offer herself to an inattentive man: a Giulietta's dress, an Ophelia's dress, a dress to mortify herself as much as the neutral clothes do, the wife's and mother's clothes that erase. That is what I knew, that is what it seemed to me that I have always known. I knew that not only the serious clothes in Eleonora's home wardrobe but also those used to perform were clothes that hung from the hangers like dead women. Alessandra would have needed the whole book to understand that. Too late: as her grandmother and her mother, she also ended in death. I

don't know how but I had understood it in my mother's clothes, in her passion to make herself beautiful, and that intuition tormented me. I didn't want to be like this.

But how did I want to be? When I thought about her, once grown up and far away, I looked for the way to understand what kind of woman I could become. I wanted to be beautiful, but how? Was it possible that one was obliged to choose between being neutral and being striking? Didn't both ways go back to the subdued dress, Harey's awful dress, the one that always stays on you and there is no way to take it off? I restlessly looked for my own way of rebelling, for freedom. The way was, as Alba de Céspedes made Alessandra say with a metaphor of perhaps religious origin, to learn how to put on, but not clothes as they will come as a consequence – but the body? And how can one reach the body beyond the clothes, the make up, the habits imposed by the routine of making oneself beautiful?

I haven't found a certain answer. But today I know that my mother, in the shabbiness of her housework as well as in the exhibition of her beauty, showed an unbearable anguish. There was only one moment when it seemed to me that she was a woman in a quiet expansion. It was when, curled up, her legs up and linked, her feet on her old chair foot-rail, the fabric shredded rejects around her, she dreamt of rescuing dresses and went ahead with needle and thread, putting together all over again the passages of her fabrics. That was the time of her real beauty.

Note

The letter to Sandra Ozzola is dated June 2003. Herein follows the letter (April, 11th 2003) and Giuliana Olivero e Camilla Valletti's questions that have originated Ferrantes' paragraph.

Dear Elena Ferrante,

We would be very pleased to add your interview to *Indice*'s pages(in the section devoted to the contemporary narrative provocatively titled "the defeated writing").

Our magazine has always and carefully followed your literary production, with reviews and interventions. In particular, we, who are writing, have read with passion your novels, and we think that your writing represents the female universe and feeling putting it as the centre of a poetics and going beyond and above literary conventionalities.

We woul be really grateful if you could answer the questions that follow and send your answers in an email via Sandra Ozzola.

With love

Camilla Valletti and Giuliana Olivero

Questions

1. In various ways, your novels' protagonists come from ancient female models and myths from a Mediterranean source, from which they move away only partially. Is suffering the result of this intermittent relation with one's origins, of this tiring and never solved distance from traditional roles?
2. Guilt and innocence. None of your protagonists can be considered innocent but not even guilty. How is the female guiltiness defined? And the male one?

3. How is the father's or mother's original betrayal connected to the following betrayals? How important is the anthropological-psychoanalytical reading of your novels' relationships?
4. Naples and Turin: why do you give places and cities an almost physical and rejecting density as if they also had a breathing body that gets sick together with their women?
5. What relationship do your protagonists have with the routine of dresses and make up?

17. An epilogue

3 July 2003

Dear Elena,

Yesterday, while at the beach, I received your email with your long answer attached to the questions posed by Indice's journalists. I found this letter extraordinarily interesting, so much so that an idea has come to mind: couldn't we make it into a book? Not a thoughtful essay, but a discussion on those topics we have often talked about all these years, that don't only interest you and me but many other people (and not only women) who loved your books and would like to follow you more closely and deeper along your path.

While your determination not to appear is quite legitimate, would probably deserve a broader answer, beyond interviews on newspapers. This is not only to appease those who make the most convoluted hypothesis about your real identity, but also for a real desire from your readers (and I must tell you that they are now really numerous) to know you better. We could publish a book that contained, besides this last work, other materials we have in our archive. It brings to mind the nice epistolary exchange with Martone during the making of the film from Troubling Love, or those letters in answer to Fofi that he never received (reason being, I believe Fofi was up to one of his usual tricks). Or perhaps the short letter on the history of the capers bush that you wrote for the 15th anniversary of the publishing house: there was an interesting introductory letter, just as

interesting as most of the letters you have sent to the publishing house. The paragraph on the caper was really nice. Would it appear too self-eulogistic? What do you think?

In short, think about it with your usual calmness, but, I believe, it would not be a bad idea to publish for Christmas an Elena Ferrante's "collection of thoughts" or something like that. You might find it useful not to think of a real book, but a sort of cahier or an initiative similar to Linea d'ombra's when they published your letters with Martone. In other words nothing that, would be particularly demanding.

Please write me your thoughts as soon as possible, and if at possible prior to your departure. If you do decide it to be a positive answer, we should start immediately.

Hugs

Sandra

Dear Sandra,

I have thought a lot about your proposal; it is full of trust into the readers' good disposition. I have considered it seriously, I have looked into all the old letters that you sent me and it is true, there is enough material for a book. But what kind of book would it be? A sort of collection of letters? And why should we print my letters? And why only those letters I sent you for some editorial reasons and not those sent to friends, relatives, love letters or those critical political and cultural letters, so as to really touch the bottom of the vacuous? Above all, why add so many of my words to the two novels?

On the other hand, I must admit that I am quite fed up of always answering no to you, you have been very patient in these past twelve years. Besides, I know very well that many "no" answers turned from "yes," a tendency to change for refusal due not only

to shyness, but to anxiety as well. Even in this case, I believe, it would be so. In short, I am doubtful. I believe that such a book might have its consistency, but not its own autonomy. I think that by its nature it can not be a title *per se*. You are right in defining it a book for the readers of Troubling Love and the Days of Abandonment with all the eventual consequences. In other words, if you decided to publish it, you would make it an appendix to those two novels, a sort of dense epilogue, as you once used to do at the end of your elegant books, an epilogue that for its dimensions has become a book. This is the way I see it. I will feel calm only in this way, in the limits as much as I can feel calm.

You have noticed that I have passed from an I into a You: By "you", I mean publishing the publishing house. It is not cunningness but the end of reasoning. If this book you have in mind is not my third book, or to say it more clearly, it is not my new book but an appendix to the first two, I can tell myself to calm down, that the decision to print it is yours and the materials are already at the publishing house. I only have to be an accomplice in helping you clarifying the confusing points, erasing some adjectives or sentences that are in the way, and giving an order to random letters.

Let me know.

Elena