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Lila Unbound: Critical Negativity and Entropy in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar

An outpouring of popular attention followed the publication of Elena Ferrante's cycle of novels *L'amica geniale*. Though Ferrante's reputation in Italy was established in 1992, when her first novel earned her a nomination for the Premio Strega, it was not until the release of the so-called Neapolitan Novels that Ferrante became the global literary phenomenon that she is today.¹ As of 2018, *L'amica geniale* had sold over 10 million copies worldwide,² and the first two installments were later turned into a critically-acclaimed TV series co-produced by HBO, RAI, and TIMvision. The saga recounts the story of Elena and Lila, two friends who grow up in an impoverished neighborhood in Naples, following them from their childhood in the Post-War Italy of the forties up to their old age in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The prologue begins when Elena, in her mid-sixties and a famous writer, learns of her friend's mysterious disappearance. The news angers her; she is sure that Lila has vanished on purpose. This effacement appears to her as the crowning gesture in a lifelong competition between the two. "Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta" ("We'll see who wins this time"), Elena thinks to herself, setting out to write, in a retaliatory manner, "ogni dettaglio della nostra storia" ("all the details of our story").³

The novel's opening establishes writing as the main tool at Elena's disposal in the enterprise of getting back (and getting back *at*) her friend. It directly speaks to "the agency that comes with authorship,"⁴ and in doing so situates Elena in an undisputed place of narrative privilege, for most of the story that we read, with the exception of prologue and epilogue, is written by her. That Lila is the focal point of the story, however, complicates questions of authorship. Indeed, it is a marked preoccupation for Elena and critics alike whether Lila is ever truly manifested in the 1700 pages of the novel, specifically because on this issue hinges one of the most vexed interpretive questions surrounding the Quartet: is it a jointly-written text and the result of triumphant sorority or the incriminating trace of a betrayal (given that Lila had explicitly forbidden Elena to ever write about her)? Admittedly, these two divergent conceptions are hyperbolic, but they serve to emphasize just how crucial issues of agency and authorship are in the Quartet. Many scholars agree that the narration is polyphonic and thus capable of

¹ For a succinct outline of the trajectory that the novels have followed and the controversy that has followed them, see Olivia Santovetti, "Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels," *The Modern Language Review* 113, no. 3 (2018): 527–45. A valuable study of the "Ferrante Fever" phenomenon and the novels' reception in the United States can be found in Stiliana Milkova, "The Translator's Visibility or the Ferrante-Goldstein Phenomenon," *Allegoria*, no. 73 (2016): 166–73.

² Lara Zarum, "'My Brilliant Friend': Here's What to Know About the HBO Adaptation," *New York Times*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/arts/television/my-brilliant-friend-reviews-hbo.html>.

³ Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2016), 19; *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012), 23.

⁴ Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, "Rethinking Constructs of Maternity in the Novels of Elena Ferrante and Alice Sebold," *Women: A Cultural Review* 30, no. 1 (2019): 76.

accommodating both friends' perspectives.⁵ I subscribe to this view to the extent that Lila's tremendous influence on Elena—and, consequently, her text—is indisputable. At the same time, Elena “è una scrittrice; il testo che leggiamo è il suo” (“is a writer; the text we're reading is hers”).⁶ The question arises: does Elena's authorial power, with its strong palimpsestic drive, render any authentic manifestation on Lila's part nearly, if not ultimately, impossible? How can we allot Lila a coterminous agency capable of manifesting itself in a text that is almost entirely plotted by Elena?

This article sets out to examine the epilogue of *L'amica geniale* as the site in the novels where Lila can be said to claim true authorship outside the bounds of Elena's text. It contends that the mysterious return of the lost dolls at the end of the cycle should be interpreted as a triumph for Lila. This interpretation posits that in the novel's treatment of the life-plot tension, Lila tends to be representative of the former and Elena of the latter, rather than establishing that it was Lila herself who orchestrated their return, a speculation that is, in any case, overshadowed by the impact of their return. Thus, in marking the closing of the plot, the dolls index a return to “life,” as well as a recalibration of the text's energies in favor of Lila. The article then employs Peter Brooks' narrative theory to understand the thermodynamic effects that the return has on the text, proceeding to apply Teresa de Lauretis' concept of the “space off” to argue that Lila's victory extends beyond the simple competitiveness that governs her relationship with Elena and into the institution of an entropic, liberating desire.

Re(in)stitution

Another disappearance looms over the beginning of Elena's text: that of Tina and Nu, the girls' dolls, thrown into a cellar by a six-year-old Lila during a mean-spirited game and never recovered. Never, that is, until the epilogue, after Elena has finished writing her story and we return once again to the frame narrative, when a package containing the dolls mysteriously appears outside her apartment in Turin. It is precisely this epilogue—“Restitution”—that interests me. While scholarship on Ferrante has burgeoned in recent years,⁷ the epilogue has yet to receive the attention it deserves. A closer look at its textual positionality can offer valuable insight into the character of Lila and, more important, into the ambivalent and “sregolatissima” (“disorderly”)⁸ nature of Lila and Elena's friendship.

In Lidia Curti's view, the epilogue functions as the text's remedy against the loss at its core—a reparation for Lila's disappearance by way of Tina and Nu's reappearance.⁹ Stiliana Milkova, in turn, perceives this moment as a way “to appropriate the literal and symbolic architecture of the neighborhood and to reconfigure it from within, to change its dynamics from

⁵ See Tiziana de Rogatis, *Parole chiave* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018), 41–46; and Massimo Fusillo, “Sulla smarginatura. Tre punti-chiave per Elena Ferrante,” *Allegoria*, no. 73 (2016): 153.

⁶ Elena Ferrante, “Donne che scrivono,” in *La frantumaglia* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2016), Kindle; *Frantumaglia*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), 287.

⁷ In June, 2019, Durham University hosted the first international academic conference dedicated to Ferrante's work. It was organized by Tiziana de Rogatis, Stiliana Milkova, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi.

⁸ Elena Ferrante, “Le persone eccessive,” in *La frantumaglia*: “Esplorare la sregolatissima amicizia femminile ha significato imparare a mettere da parte ogni idealizzazione letteraria e ogni tentazione edificante” (*Frantumaglia*, 293; “Exploring the disorderliness of female friendship meant learning to set aside every literary idealization and every temptation to instruct”).

⁹ Lidia Curti, “Tra presenza e assenza,” in *Dell'ambivalenza. Dinamiche della narrazione in Elena Ferrante, Julie Otsuka e Goliarda Sapienza*, eds. Anna Maria Crispino and Marina Vitale (Rome: Iacobelli, 2016), 52.

an androcentric locus of power to a feminine city labyrinth of women's creative power."¹⁰ Interpretive divergences notwithstanding, there seems to be consensus about one thing: critics are confident in attributing the return of the dolls to Lila. Understandably so, considering that Elena herself does. Emma Van Ness states that, in returning the dolls, "Lila wrests power over the narrative back from Elena, demonstrates that she has been in control all along."¹¹ Caterina Falotico, then, claims that "se si considera il valore simbolico connesso all'episodio delle due bambole ... il gesto oscuro di Lila suona come monito e come riconciliazione" ("if we consider the symbolic value of the episode of the dolls ... Lila's obscure gesture appears as a warning and as a reconciliation").¹² These are doubtless revelatory assertions, and something about this episode does seem to tilt the scales in favor of Lila. Nevertheless, it is crucial to bear in mind that no concrete textual evidence is provided to assert her involvement in it.¹³ The package in which the dolls arrive contains no note, and in the sixty years since the dolls were lost, Lila showed no signs of having them. Does this mean that we cannot interpret the return as Lila's triumph? Elena does, and perceives their return as a manipulative move by Lila: "Ecco cosa aveva fatto: mi aveva ingannata, mi aveva trascinata dove voleva lei, fin dall'inizio della nostra amicizia. Per tutta la vita aveva raccontato una *sua* storia di riscatto, usando il *mio* corpo vivo e la *mia* esistenza" ("Here's what she had done: she had deceived me, she had dragged me wherever she wanted, from the beginning of our friendship. All our lives she had told a story of redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence").¹⁴

To fully grasp the significance of this return, it is necessary to go back in time to the moment when Elena and Lila descend into Don Achille's cellar to search for their dolls. This event is "originario e formativo" ("originary and formative")¹⁵ and it makes possible the ascent to Don Achille's house—the moment that, according to Elena, marks the beginning of her friendship with Lila. Keeping in mind the foundational power attributed to the dolls, as well as the fact that they are at the core—perhaps even the very cause—of the girls' friendship, would it be safe to say that without them, there would be no story in the first place?

After all, it is no accident that the cellar is the locus of their disappearance. Scholars, including de Rogatis and Falotico, have pointed out the centrality of the image of the cellar in

¹⁰ Stiliana Milkova, "Ariadne and the Minotaur: Symbolic & Literal Labyrinth in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*" (lecture, NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, New York, March 27, 2019).

¹¹ Emma Van Ness, "Dixit Mater: The Significance of the Maternal Voice in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels," in *The Works of Elena Ferrante Reconfiguring the Margins*, eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 310.

¹² Caterina Falotico, "Elena Ferrante: Il ciclo dell'*Amica Geniale* tra autobiografia, storia e metaletteratura," *Forum Italicum* 49, no. 1 (2015): 110, my translation.

¹³ Roberta Mazzanti, for instance, unequivocally claims that Lila took the dolls in the basement and kept them for decades. Roberta Mazzanti, "Madri e figlie in Elena Ferrante," in *Dell'ambivalenza. Dinamiche della narrazione in Elena Ferrante, Julie Otsuka e Goliarda Sapienza*, eds. Anna Maria Crispino and Marina Vitale (Rome: Iacobelli, 2016), 91.

¹⁴ Elena Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018), 451; *The Story of the Lost Child*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), 473.

¹⁵ Stiliana Milkova, "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna: spazio liminale, labirinto urbano e città femminile ne *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante," *Contemporanea*, no. 15 (2017): 81, my translation. In a lecture titled "Ariadne and the Minotaur: Symbolic & Literal Labyrinth in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*," given at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, Milkova explores Naples as a literal and symbolic labyrinth. She sees the Quartet as a rewriting of the myth of Ariadne and the Minotaur in which Theseus has been replaced by a feminine couple that must resist the patriarchal structures embedded into the *rione*'s literal and symbolic architecture. Her convincing reading is primarily based on this descent and the subsequent ascent to Don Achille's house.

Ferrante's imaginary,¹⁶ linking it to the following passage in *La frantumaglia* about "the cellar of writing":

Con gli anni, per esempio, mi vergogno sempre meno di come mi appassionavo alle storie dei giornaletti femminili che circolavano per casa; robaccia di amori e tradimenti, che però mi ha causato emozioni indelebili... Anche questo scantinato dello scrivere, fondo pieno di piacere che per anni ho represso in nome della Letteratura, mi pare che vada messo al lavoro, perché non solo sui classici ma anche lì è cresciuta la smania di racconto.

(Over the years, for example, I've become less ashamed of how much I like the stories in the women's magazines I find around the house: trash about love and betrayal, which has produced in me indelible emotions... It seems to me that this cellar of writing, a fund of pleasure that for years I repressed in the name of Literature, should also be put to work, because it was not only with the classics but there, too, that the desire for storytelling developed.)¹⁷

If the cellar of writing is conceived by Ferrante as a "fund," a repository of stories, it is understandable that the girls must descend to a cellar in search of a story, in search of the plot that is about to define their lives. The Faustian inscription in the text's genetic makeup continually underscores the act of plotting as a *Teufelspakt*, a pact with the Devil, which renders the engagement with perversion inescapable. Hence it is into the loan shark's cellar that the dolls are thrown, just as it is his money (received as compensation for the dolls) that enables Elena's *Bildung*.¹⁸ In this sense, the dolls incarnate the transaction central to this *Teufelspakt*. More specifically, as the device charged with bringing the narration out of quiescence (the original and originary conflict of the story revolves around them), they are, we could say, the sacrificial object given in exchange for the act of plotting to occur.¹⁹ The connection that Falotico makes between the cellar in the novels and Ferrante's cellar of writing suggests this sacrificial

¹⁶ De Rogatis, *Parole chiave*, 155; Falotico, "Elena Ferrante," 112. De Rogatis also argues that "lo scantinato della quadrilogia e l'interrato dell'*Amore molesto* sono eterotopie: «utopie situate» in un contesto concreto" (156; "the cellar in the quartet and the basement in *Troubling Love* are heterotopias: utopias situated in a concrete context"). This translation is found in: *Elena Ferrante: Key Words*, trans. Will Schutt (New York: Europa Editions, 2019), 153. This conception of the cellar deeply informs my understanding of this and other obscure spaces as representative of Lila and, ultimately, of the institution of a desire that stands somewhat outside the bounds of the ground plotted by Elena. Approaching, as de Rogatis does, these obscure spaces through the lens of Foucault's term affords us a clearer grasp of the ways in which they exercise an internal pressure on the text—how, in other words, they resist and destabilize Elena's authorial power from the inside, how they constitute a world within a world. If, in the second part of this article, I choose de Lauretis' concept of the "space off" in lieu of Foucault's "heterotopia," it is because of the former's emphasis on the interstitial nature of feminist spaces carved within larger andro-centric hegemonic discourses. Not to mention the fact that de Lauretis' framework and her insistence on spaces constructed in the margins provide us with a fresh take on Ferrante's oft-discussed *smarginatura*.

¹⁷ Ferrante, "Scrivere nascostamente," in *La frantumaglia; Frantumaglia*, 64.

¹⁸ From this perspective, too, the dolls are understood as necessary: if Don Achille had not given Lila and Elena money after they accused him of taking the dolls, the girls would have never bought *Little Women*, and Elena, ostensibly, never would have become a writer. If the Genettian "récit minimal" of *L'amica geniale* is, arguably, "Elena devient écrivaine," then, without dolls, there is no novel.

¹⁹ Milkova discusses the cellar as a chthonic space, which speaks to the sacrificial function that I attribute to the dolls (Milkova, "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna," 84). Milkova's article is a valuable study of the links between architecture, identity, and narration.

function.²⁰ Tina and Nu are thrown into the cellar (of writing) in order to activate the narrative magic that alchemizes reality—the dolls, “povere e brutte” (“cheap and ugly”)—and transforms it into fiction. If we understand their original loss as a sacrificial one, then their return is, firstly, a form of ransom: given in exchange for a story, they are now taken back as the fiction we are reading comes to an end. This explains the disenchanting effect that they have on Elena sixty years after their disappearance: “Nel constatare che erano povere e brutte mi sono sentita confusa. A differenza che nei racconti, la vita vera, quando è passata, si sporge non sulla chiarezza ma sull’oscurità” (“Seeing how cheap and ugly they were I felt confused. Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity”).²¹ As the dolls are restituted, “real life” is *reinstated*. But, we must ask, what has this got to do with Lila?

Life / Plot

An obvious thing to point out about the epilogue is that it stands outside the plotted ground of the novel. Admittedly, it is subsumed under the novel’s first-person narration; without wanting to overstate its externality, however, it is important to note that along with the prologue, it is the only portion of the text not written by Elena, and therefore not subject to her retributive impulses. Thus, because it is not part of Elena’s text, it is free from her authorial control, making explicit a dramatization of the life-plot relationship that the novels continually thematize and that critics have noted. Elisa Gambaro, for instance, writes of the “centralità assoluta del nesso vita/scrittura” (“the absolute centrality of the life/writing connection”)²² and Olivia Santovetti of a gap embodied in the two friends “between writing and life.”²³ Indeed, the relationship between Elena and Lila can be approached from various critical angles: it can, for instance, be understood as a generic difference, if one is interested in Ferrante’s skillful adoption and manipulation of literary genres;²⁴ it can be examined through the lens of feminist sorority, or as a modern reconfiguration of classical myths (as Milkova and de Rogatis have effectively done). For present purposes, however, I would like focus on a tension underpinning the textual relationship between the two friends, namely, the tension between life and plot.²⁵ Life, in this case, is to be understood as reality without a recognizable order, the sort of raw material that must be processed by the senses in order to be apprehensible. It is, to borrow from Lila’s words “la vita allo stato puro...la vita senza una veste, senza un contenitore, ... sformata” (“life in the pure

²⁰ Falotico, “Elena Ferrante,” 112.

²¹ Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, 451; *The Story of the Lost Child*, 473.

²² Elisa Gambaro, “Il fascino del regresso. Note su *L’amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante.” *Enthymema*, no. 11 (2014): 173, my translation.

²³ Olivia Santovetti, “Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels,” *The Modern Language Review* 113, no. 3 (2018): 534.

²⁴ See Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, “An Alternative Geometry: *L’amica geniale* and the *Bildungsroman*,” *The Modern Language Review* 116, no. 3 (forthcoming). In addition, Raffaele Donnarumma discusses the Quartet’s relationship with the *feuilleton* thus: “Elena Ferrante sceglie insomma il *feuilleton*, si appropria delle sue leggi con ostinazione, e lo sabota, contestando l’illusione che esso ingenera: e cioè che nella vita tutto torna, tutto si ricompatti, tutto acquista un senso” (“Elena Ferrante therefore chooses the *feuilleton*, obstinately makes use of its laws, and sabotages it, criticizing the illusion that it generates: namely, that in life everything adds up, everything returns to normal, everything gains meaning”). Raffaele Donnarumma, “Il melodramma, l’anti-melodramma, la Storia: sull’*Amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante,” *Allegoria*, no. 73 (2016): 143, my translation

²⁵ For a longer and more nuanced discussion of how this tension between plot and life in the pure state informs Ferrante’s general poetics, see Zarour Zarzar, “Bumping into the Novelistic Scaffolding: Narrative Structure in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 13, no. 2 (2020): 186–202.

state... life without a covering, without a container, ... shapeless”).²⁶ This is both an epistemic and a narrative issue, at least to the extent that we understand narrative to be a central category of our epistemic practices, as indispensable as it is inescapable.²⁷

To be precise, the tension that I identify concerns the *textual* relationship between Lila and Elena, in other words, the power dynamics inherent to Elena’s position as storyteller and Lila’s position as, arguably, the protagonist of the story. As storyteller, Elena is more representative of the act of plotting and coding through language; she threads the narrative that we read, orders its events, and in doing so imbues them with intention and meaning. In narrative terms, she is the mastermind and our only point of access. Along these lines, Enrica Maria Ferrara recognizes Elena’s alignment with a reality that is coded through language. In her study of *The Days of Abandonment*, she argues for an understanding of Ferrante’s work not as grounded in a form of representational realism that prioritizes human agency and Cartesian dualism, but instead as gesturing toward a performative realism attuned to non-human agency. Ferrara identifies Elena as characteristic of the former, “a true champion of linguistic performativity [who] deeply believes in the ability of the subject to control her/his knowledge of other subjects and objects alike through signifying processes expressed through language.”²⁸ Admittedly, Lila is also associated with plotting throughout the text, yet she is, at least in the embedded narrative, relegated to the role of the told, never the teller. And while Elena, in turn, experiences something akin to *smarginatura*—the phenomenon whereby the margins that keep things in place dissolve—after the loss of her doll, Lila is inarguably more invested in and afraid of what she calls “la vita allo stato puro.” If there are moments when she seems overly invested in coding reality, it is because she experiences the threat of disintegration all the much more intensely (suffice it to think of her reaction to the earthquake).²⁹

About Lila’s writing, it is important to note that, superb as it is reputed to be, it is tellingly absent from the narration. In fact, it continuously serves as wellspring—or raw material—for Elena. This is evident in the innumerable instances in which we see Lila’s impact on Elena’s writing and thinking: *The Blue Fairy* turns out to be the foundation of Elena’s first novel, Lila’s ideas about Dido are the cornerstone of Elena’s lauded essay, and her diaries prove to be extremely stimulating to Elena. Yet none of these sources are ever directly quoted; instead, they are absorbed and processed by the narration, a fact that leads Stefania Lucamante to affirm that

²⁶ Elena Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018), 221–22; *The Story of a New Name*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), 222.

²⁷ Naturally, any reframing of the age-old life/story tandem that occurs within the bounds of a fictional text must be taken with some skepticism. Perhaps, insofar as narrative in general speaks of our time-boundedness, we can even speak of the impossibility of escaping plot. This boundedness notwithstanding, the postulation of the pre- or un-plotted, or “life in the pure state,” remains as possible as it is necessary. For a study on narrative and its relation to our time-boundedness, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Knopf, 1984).

²⁸ Enrica Maria Ferrara, “Performative Realism and Post-Humanism in *The Days of Abandonment*,” in *The Works of Elena Ferrante Reconfiguring the Margins*, eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 137.

²⁹ Further indication of Lila’s “unplottedness” can be found in Ferrante’s assertion that, in writing her character, she attempted to “raccontare la scia di effervescente incompiutezza che queste intelligenze multiformi, che non si lasciano mai definire, lasciano dietro di sé” (Ferrante, “Le persone eccessive,” in *La frantumaglia*; “describe the wake of sparkling incompleteness that trails behind these many-sided intelligences, who can never be defined” [*Frantumaglia*, 294]). And what, we must ask, is plotting if not completing, defining? And is Elena’s text not exactly that—an attempt to complete, to define her friend through language and plot?

“Elena has cannibalized Lila.”³⁰ This suggests a readjustment of the view whereby Lila and Elena’s creation is concomitant to one in which Lila becomes Elena’s source of storytelling, forcing us to inflect our understanding of the symbiosis that critics often ascribe to the friendship as a form of parasitism.³¹

Of course, the diegetic absence of Lila’s writing does not diminish its importance. In fact, it is central to the conceit I am trying to communicate: it is “the real thing” from which Elena’s writing feeds, as well as the absent referent that makes her writing seem imperfect. In *La frantumaglia*, Ferrante writes of her wish to tell of a complex friendship between two women

in modo che la voce narrante palesemente si tacesse una parte del racconto, come se non riuscisse a portarlo fino in fondo o come se le sue pagine fossero la brutta copia di una storia che non riuscirà mai ad arrivare in bella perché è l’altra, colei che non racconta ma è raccontata, ad avere la potenza per portarla pienamente a compimento.

(in a way so that the narrative voice is openly silent about a part of the story, as if she couldn’t complete it, or as if its pages were the rough draft of a story that will never achieve a finished version, because it’s the other, she who doesn’t describe but is described, who has the power to bring it fully to the end.)³²

Notice, by the by, the clear distinction between she who, actively, “racconta” and she who, passively, “è raccontata”. It is telling that Ferrante reconfigures the translational relationship as one between a rough draft and a finished version. The possibility presents itself that Elena’s text will only bear a platonic semblance to the “original,”³³ that her text is nothing but a rough draft. Or, if we take the Italian “brutta copia” and in an exercise of mistranslation (and thus of betrayal) render it literally, it is nothing but an “ugly copy.”

This copy is in itself a mistranslation of sorts. Rebecca Falkoff argues that the Quartet performs the famous Italian proverb whereby to translate is to betray (“tradurre è tradire”). The novels, she writes, “*translate* by rewriting Lila’s lost pages [...] They *betray* not only by dulling Lila’s expressive force [...] but also by their very existence, as Elena had promised Lila never to write about her.”³⁴ It makes sense to read Elena’s text as a “translation”; Milkova writes

³⁰ Stefania Lucamante, “Undoing Feminism: The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante,” *Italica* 95, no. 1 (2018): 46.

³¹ As de Rogatis argues, “Tutto, in Elena e Lila, è sotto il segno della simbiosi” (“Everything, in Elena and Lila, is under the sign of symbiosis” [translation by copyeditor]). See Tiziana de Rogatis, “Metamorfosi del tempo. Il ciclo dell’*Amica geniale*,” *Allegoria*, no. 73 (2016): 124. See also Santovetti, “Melodrama or Metafiction,” 535.

³² Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 300; *Frantumaglia*, 311.

³³ There is another way in which we can conceive of Elena’s text as a rough draft. See Zarour Zarzar, “Bad Blood: On Culpability and a Metabolic Approach to Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 263–85. In this article, I investigate the various ways in which the Quartet sabotages the endings to some of its plot lines, such as the ending of Tina’s story and the ambiguity surrounding it. If it is in light of endings that we read beginnings and middles, by either exposing the artificiality of endings or by denying them point-blank, the novels sabotage the fundamental interpretive activity that leads us to grasp the “text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the metonymies that have led to it” (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 108). Envisioning the text as a rough draft, by definition an *unfinished* one, works toward emphasizing this epistemological ambiguity. Which raises the question: How do we read an unfinished work?

³⁴ Rebecca Falkoff, “To Translate Is to Betray: On the Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US,” *Public Books*, March 3, 2015, www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/. Translation is an essential topic for Ferrante. The conceit that I am trying to communicate in these pages

that “the opening of the tetralogy, its narrative frame, hinges on translation as process and metaphor.”³⁵ Elena’s might be a translation of Lila’s hypothetical text, yes, but also of the numerous texts that she writes and that Elena draws from, such as the aforementioned *The Blue Fairy* or the document on the working conditions at Bruno Soccavo’s factory. This dynamics of “influence,” then, mimics the process whereby “la vita allo stato puro” is coded into plot.

By reinforcing Elena and Lila’s allegiance to plotting and real life, respectively, the novels make sure that the return of the dolls registers as a return to real life, and therefore to a realm in which Lila is not under her friend’s narrative jurisdiction. Of course, as inspired as Elena is or hopes to be by Lila, she is ultimately forced to recognize that her friend “non è in queste parole” (“is not in these words”).³⁶ This is perhaps a somewhat disappointing realization to readers who have invested considerable time and emotional energy on the story of these two friends, yet simultaneously a potent commentary on Ferrante’s part on the one-sidedness of elegy.³⁷ This admission of failure, furthermore, lays the ground for Lila to manifest herself in the epilogue through the reappearance of the dolls. But, in disgorging the dolls and tipping the scales ever so slightly in favor of Lila, what does the cellar—that spatial representation of the wellspring of storytelling—set in motion? In the following pages, I will move on to considerations of what this narrative reconfiguration does, on the one hand, to Elena and Lila’s friendship, and, on the other, to the text itself. In short, I would like to understand what exactly happens to the text now that Lila “si è fatta vedere così nitidamente” (“has let herself be seen so plainly”).³⁸

Lila Unbound

While the return of the dolls does not solve the mystery of their disappearance, it certainly reactivates it. In doing so, it can be said to unbind “energies that we thought had been thoroughly bound and indeed discharged from the text.”³⁹ I am invoking Peter Brooks’ observations about the ending of *Great Expectations*, which he thought was so at odds with the plot Dickens had sketched as to belong to an entirely different story.⁴⁰ If, like Brooks, we conceive of texts as

whereby the Quartet itself is the unsuccessful translation of a hypothetical text is just one facet of this. The equally hypothetical translation from dialect into Italian is another facet. But take, for instance, the issue of thematic translatability: Ferrante has worked and reworked the same themes in the course of her career as a writer. On an entirely different level, the novels have achieved unparalleled critical and public success not in their original language, but abroad and in translation. Translatability, de Rogatis and Fusillo contend, forms part of a larger aesthetic project that makes Ferrante one of our time’s “glocal” novelists (de Rogatis, *Parole chiave*, 162; Fusillo, “Sulla smarginatura,” 150). Similarly, Segnini argues that “the Elena Ferrante ‘project’ and the success of these works in translation highlight readers’ tendency to see authenticity as bound to the dimension of the local, and a preference for this dimension over the global” (Elisa Segnini, “Andrea Camilleri’s Montalbano and Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale*: the afterlife of two ‘glocal’ series,” *The Translator* [2018]: 115).

³⁵ Milkova, “The Translator’s Visibility,” 171.

³⁶ Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, 447; *The Story of the Lost Child*, 469.

³⁷ See Nancy K. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 3. This gesture is also integral to her reluctance to idealize female friendship. In other words, I do not read the rivalry between the friends and Elena’s alleged failure to encapsulate Lila in her story as a form of “undoing feminism,” as Lucamante argues, but rather as part of Ferrante’s project of portraying female friendship in all its complexities and its “punti di incoerenza” (Ferrante, “Racontare ciò che sfugge al racconto,” in *La frantumaglia*).

³⁸ Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, 451; *The Story of the Lost Child*, 473.

³⁹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 136.

⁴⁰ For an analysis of *Great Expectations* that employs Brooks’ energetic theory and revises the conclusions he draws from the novel, see Zarour Zarzar, “Authoring Desire: *Great Expectations* and the *Bildungsroman*,” *Dickens Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2019): 347–61.

thermodynamic plenums, as systems of “internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires”⁴¹ that are worked through and plotted to the point of discharge, then the return of the dolls registers as an excess of textual energy. For, on the one hand, it occurs at the end of the novel, when the story we have read has come to a conclusion; and, on the other hand, even if the mystery of the doll’s disappearance was never solved, the text had, at least superficially, moved on to other considerations. For the reasons expanded upon in the first part of this article, the epilogue’s few pages can be said to bring us closer to Lila than the preceding 1700 ever did. If at the beginning of the novels the plot is fueled by Elena’s desire to force Lila onto the page by writing over her disappearance, and if it is this desire to keep the narration alive, the ending—“Reinstitution”—presents us with a shift in the economy of this desire, one that vindicates an entropic figure. We have, now, the *institution* of Lila’s desire, which, the novel suggests, can only occur outside the bounds of Elena’s text, on the margins, in the “space off.”

Understanding this final return as entropic is important. Within the textual thermodynamic model, the plotting activity (through repetition and other formal device) becomes the force charged with shaping energy into semantic bundles necessary to make a text a coherent whole. What arises here is an opposition between raw material in the shape of textual energy and the formal tasks of plotting, the former tending toward disorder and destruction, the latter tending toward synthesis and construction. This, in fact, provides us with yet another way of reckoning with the friends’ relationship beyond (yet still aligned with) the life/plot tension. Lila is constantly tending toward destruction, chaos, entropy (think of her constant [self-]destructive behavior), while Elena, as plotter, is constantly tending toward form (and thus creation). Van Ness points this out, writing that the friends “are the dialectical poles of [...] destruction and creation, defiance and representation.”⁴² If Elena’s plotting binds, the return of the dolls becomes entropic because it reactivates the mystery of the provenance of the dolls (its incoherence, too, as Brooks would have it), and does so in the epilogue, outside of the realm of Elena’s plotting. Not only does it release and unbind energies that cannot be bound any longer because the novel is about to end, but it also releases them in the form of the text’s central, originary mystery, which refuses to be resolved.

Hence, I do not in any way attribute to the epilogue the capacity to settle accounts. Curti, for instance, interprets it as a moment of closure.⁴³ The idea of a circle that has been closed is firmly ruled out by the excess textual energy and, moreover, by the text’s semantic fissures. In keeping this mystery unresolved, the text maintains its status as *smarginato*. The dolls are, in fact, a symbol of “ciclicità smarginata” (“*smarginata* cyclicity”) for de Rogatis,⁴⁴ an image that suggests another valence of the oft-discussed term *smarginatura*. *Treccani* points out that *smarginatura* is “in botanica, leggera incisione all’apice di un organo... Si dice smarginato un organo che presenta un intaglio poco profondo e irregolare lungo il bordo” (“in botany, a slight incision in the apex of an organ ... An organ is *smarginato* when it presents an irregular and superficial cut along its edge”).⁴⁵ As an incision on the apex that produces an irregularity on the

⁴¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, xiv.

⁴² Van Ness, “*Dixit Mater*,” 308.

⁴³ Curti, “Tra presenza e assenza,” 52.

⁴⁴ de Rogatis, *Parole chiave*, 109; *Key Words*, 107.

⁴⁵ *Treccani*, s.v. “smarginatura,” accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/smarginatura/>; my translation. Admittedly, *smarginatura* is a neologism that, in Segnini’s words, “carries the connotation of a unique signifier, of something that cannot be rendered in standard Italian” (Segnini, “Andrea Camilleri’s Montalbano and Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale*,” 6). Still, the botanical definition of *smarginatura* provides an additional way of understanding the term, even if it does not encapsulate the entirety of its meaning.

borders of the leaf, I understand *smarginatura* to work textually as that which prevents a sense of unambiguous or regular closure, as an incision, however tiny, on the borders—the margins—of a story that ultimately refuses to provide a smooth ending and, with it, a sense of closure. The text's insistence on leaving this mystery in the dark precludes any form of hermeneutic closure, foregrounding a sort of poetics of obscurity.

If readers are tempted to read closure into this final gesture, it is because of the apparent resolute nature at its core—the fact that we narratively connect it to the disappearance of the dolls at the beginning of the cycle and are therefore inclined to seeing it as compensation for that primordial loss. The title of the epilogue, “Restitution,” seems to confirm this. But if Lila's triumph forces us to recalibrate the energetic transactions of the text, then we must probe this restitution: what is being restituted, and to whom? Outwardly, the dolls are returned to Elena, who had so keenly suffered the loss of Tina. A residue remains, however, in the form of Nu. A restitution *sensu stricto* would have involved only the doll that was stolen from Elena. It is precisely the excess in this transaction that moves me in a different interpretive direction. Rather than claiming that the lost dolls are being restituted to Elena, I contend that this return as restitution operates in the opposite direction. That is, through this gesture, Lila is being restituted her autonomy. It is not Lila who “pays back” for damage that she has caused, but Elena.

And what is Elena guilty of? Simply put, writing. The end returns us to the beginning: “Eliminating All the Traces.” A close examination reveals Elena's text to be the “trace” of her guilt, for it stands in clear defiance of Lila's request not to be written about.⁴⁶ To Lila's decision to eliminate all traces of her existence, Elena responds by reinscribing those traces, and in her own terms. “Volevo che lei durasse” (“I wanted her to last”), she writes, “ma volevo essere io a farla durare. Credevo che fosse il mio compito” (“I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task”).⁴⁷ Elena's arrogation of the right to write about Lila is ultimately an act of arrogance, and a fully conscious one at that. A mere paragraph after the above quotation, she writes: “C'è questa presunzione, in chi si sente destinato alle arti e soprattutto alla letteratura: si lavora come se si fosse ricevuta un'investitura, ma in effetti nessuno ci ha mai investiti di alcunché” (“There is this presumption, in those who feel destined for art and above all literature: we act as if we had received an investiture, but in fact no one has ever invested us with anything”).⁴⁸ At the beginning, then, an act of treason. Elena is writing over her friend.⁴⁹ Not by chance is the formulation “farla durare” (“make her last”) said only twice in the Quartet, both in reference to Lila: once by Elena, and before that by Michele Solara, the mobster who develops

⁴⁶ In this sense, Lila's trust in Elena is unequivocally misplaced, and Elena's retributive gesture and the textual energies it sets off would seem to put to the test the notion of *affidamento* (entrustment), elsewhere very present in the text. This practice—modelled after mother-daughter relationships—was propounded by Luisa Muraro and became crucial to the practices of the *Libreria delle donne di Milano* in the 1980s. As Leslie Elwell points out, *affidamento* “places emphasis not on a given similarity between women but rather on the specificity of each woman and on differences among women” (Leslie Elwell, “Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*,” in *The Works of Elena Ferrante Reconfiguring the Margins*, eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016], 243). The marked differences between the two friends and their alternating subalternity, their reliance on each other, and Ferrante's constant juxtapositions between Lila and Elena's mother are all clear nods to the practice of *affidamento*, yet one also cannot ignore how the concept is problematized by Elena's unreliability.

⁴⁷ Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, 441; *The Story of the Lost Child*, 463.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 441–42; 463.

⁴⁹ While I would not agree with Lucamante's assertion that “a woman's autonomy becomes possible only at the expense of the sisterhood” as a categorical statement (Lucamante, “Undoing Feminism,” 39), I do think that, at times, the Quartet places sisterhood at odds with autonomy (or rather, authorship).

an obsession with Lila. We would do well to think of what these two characters have in common in their relationship to Lila, for both try, albeit in different ways, to contain and possess her, molding her according to their vision.

This arrogation repositions Elena’s text as the figure of a testament betrayed.⁵⁰ The deeply violent implications of not only ignoring but actively working against Lila’s erasure cannot be ignored. Why would Elena do this? The palimpsestic impulse can itself be understood as a form of punishment for what Elena perceives as a betrayal: Lila’s decision to disappear. We cite once more the incisive lines that opened this article, “Mi sono sentita molto arrabbiata,” Elena writes in the prologue, “Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta, mi sono detta” (“I was really angry. We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself”).⁵¹ We have entered the deep well of blame here, a seemingly never-ending cycle of perceived offenses and subsequent retributions.⁵² What is the result of all these subtractions and additions? The following chart (Fig. 1) presents what I see as the text’s strongest acts of culpability (acts that have a clear effect on the novel’s structure), divided by how they are presented in the *sjuzet* and how we can infer they occurred in the *fabula*:

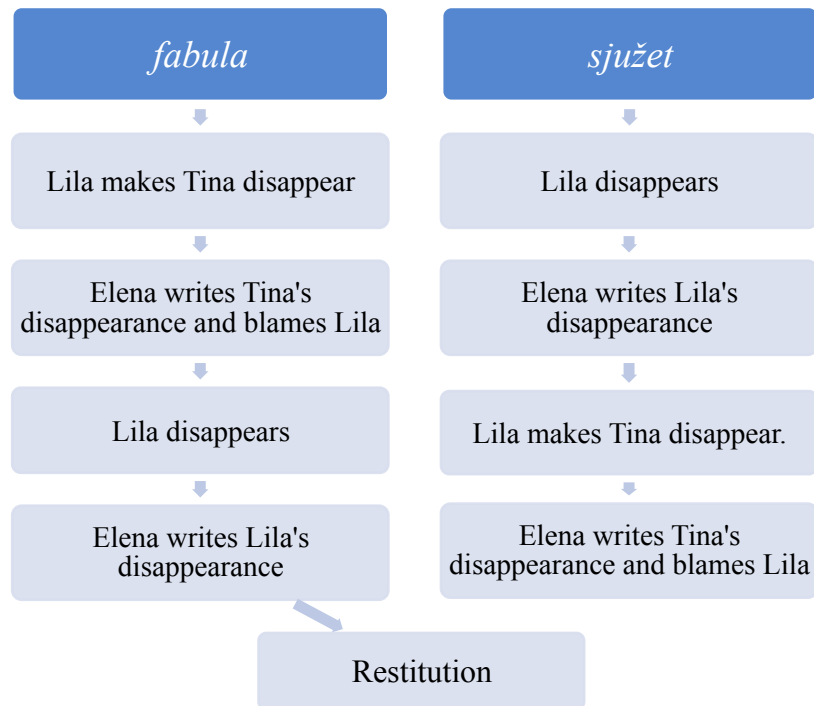


Fig. 1. Chart made by author.

⁵⁰ Milan Kundera has written at length about this idea, taking Max Brod as the model for disobedience to one’s friends. Brod, as is widely known, decided to publish Kafka’s writings against his explicit wishes. Kundera writes: “Publier ce que l’auteur a supprimé est donc le même acte de viol que censurer ce qu’il a décidé de garder” (“Therefore, publishing what the author deleted is the same act of rape as censoring what he decided to retain”). For the original French see: Milan Kundera, *Les testaments trahis* [Paris: Gallimard, 1993], 321. This translation is found in: Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 269.

⁵¹ Ferrante, *L’amica geniale*, 19; *My Brilliant Friend*, 23.

⁵² A brief technical note: even though Lila cannot be certain that Elena is writing the text we are reading, we do have strong textual evidence to conclude that she knows of the existence of *Un’amicizia*, which, albeit a different text, constitutes the same kind of betrayal.

Note that each event tends to simultaneously be an act of punishment on the agent's part and a sign of culpability as perceived by the recipient. So, for instance, I have suggested elsewhere that Elena writes of Tina's disappearance to avenge the loss of the doll Tina.⁵³ In this scenario, Lila is culpable in the eyes of Elena. The act of writing *Un'amicizia* ("A Friendship"), however, is then perceived by Lila as a betrayal, making therefore Elena culpable and prompting Lila to disappear. Elena, in turn, reacts to this disappearance by writing over Lila's disappearance. This (con)sequential progress is best delineated on the left column. Notice, too, that Lila always tends toward disappearance and destruction (entropy), whereas Elena inevitably turns to creation and writing (form; anabolism), an act that gains a retributive valence. On the right column, that of the *sjuzet*, the events are listed in the order in which they are presented to us. The consequentiality is not as evident—strangely, one might say, given plot's propensity to order and impose causality—yet if we infer a form of causality on the left column, it is only through what Elena tells us on the right, so that the idea that the chain of culpability begins with Lila actually originates in the *sjuzet*. Once again, "reality" becomes inaccessible. What most interests me here is that only "Restitution" occupies the same place in both the *fabula* and the *sjuzet* (fifth), so that rather than restoring balance, it sets it off. It reopens the accounts, if anything, since one could say that retributive balance had been achieved in the process of the first four events. This restitution/reinstitution is in excess, it goes beyond. Or, as I said before, the institution of Lila's desire occurs outside the bounds of Elena's text, and becomes possible only in the "space off."

I borrow this expression from Teresa de Lauretis, who, in *Technologies of Gender*, elaborates on the possibility of creating new spaces of discourse and, eventually, a different construction of gender. These new spaces enable fresh perspectives, "a view from 'elsewhere'" that, nevertheless, is not recognizable as representation.⁵⁴ That elsewhere, de Lauretis writes,

is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati.⁵⁵

Tellingly, de Lauretis clarifies that this "elsewhere" is not beyond, nor is it outside the boundaries of representation, since no reality exists outside discourse. "What I mean," she writes, "is a movement from the space represented by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them."⁵⁶ Here is where the concept of "space off" appears, which she in turn borrows from film theory and which refers to "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible."⁵⁷ This is important. Even though I have been speaking of a space *beyond* or *outside* the margins, a description that de Lauretis would seem to refute, the space I posit is coterminous with the concept of "space off," not least because this space—life in the pure state—is not directly accessible, but inferable. De Lauretis' precision allows me to clarify that the beyond I have been discussing is only in a

⁵³ Zarour Zarzar, "On Culpability and a Metabolic Approach to *My Brilliant Friend*," 267.

⁵⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

manner outside the bounds of plot. Can we then ascribe to Lila's presence in *L'amica geniale* what de Lauretis ascribes to avant-garde cinema, namely, the capacity to show "the space-off to exist concurrently and alongside the represented space, [making] it visible by remarking its absence in the frame or in the succession of frames?"⁵⁸

De Lauretis elaborates on the subject of feminism, which she takes to be characterized by a movement between the represented and what is left out, or, as she calls it, the "unrepresentable":

It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist, since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins (or "between the lines," or "against the grain") of hegemonic discourses and in the interstices of institutions, in counterpractices and new forms of community: These two kinds [...] coexist concurrently and in contradiction [...] Thus, to inhabit both kinds of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which, I have suggested, is the condition of feminism here and now: the tension of a twofold pull in contrary directions—the critical negativity of its theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics—is both the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility. The subject of feminism is en-gendered there. That is to say, elsewhere.⁵⁹

Some of the generic tensions present in the Quartet can be thought of in the terms proposed above. If in Elena's *Bildung* and in the world of the *rione* we encounter the spaces of hegemonic discourse, in Lila we constantly find the "space off," the "elsewhere." de Lauretis's framework allows us to rethink Lila's narrative positionality. Perhaps this is ultimately what her self-erasure conveys—a literary manifestation of critical negativity.

I am particularly drawn to the idea of a critical negativity being embodied by Lila. I see this in the innumerable instances in which Lila refuses to be subordinated, whenever she displays the stubbornness and resolution that link her to other memorable female characters of the modern European novel, characters like Clarissa, who defiantly asks: "Why should I be denied the liberty of *refusing*? That liberty is all I ask."⁶⁰ However, I identify this critical negativity primarily through Lila's structural role as Mephistopheles, *der Geist der stets verneint* (the spirit of denial or contradiction, the spirit who says no). It is no coincidence that Lila's last words to Elena are in the negative: "Da me no" ("Not from me").⁶¹ For the novel to leave us with this negative is fundamental; it highlights Lila's customary response to the world—dissent—and brings to mind the fundamental activity linked to the cellar—*descent*.⁶² Dissent, of course, is a form of non-participation, which Ferrante has discussed at length:

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (Cambridge: Penguin Books, 1985), 221.

⁶¹ Elena Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2017), 20; *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), 30.

⁶² For a study of how Lila's constant refusals deeply inform the novel's inner resistance to the *Bildungsroman*, see Zarour Zarzar, "An Alternative Geometry."

La scomparsa delle donne non va interpretata solo come un crollo della combattività di fronte alla violenza del mondo, ma anche come rifiuto netto. C'è in italiano un'espressione intraducibile nel suo doppio significato: "io non ci sto." Se presa alla lettera significa: io non sono qui, in questo luogo, di fronte a ciò che mi state proponendo di accettare. Nel suo significato comune suona invece: non sono d'accordo, non voglio. Il rifiuto è assentarsi dai giochi di chi schiaccia tutti i deboli.

(The disappearance of women should be interpreted not only as giving up the fight against the violence of the world but also as clear rejection. There is an expression in Italian whose double meaning is untranslatable: "Io non ci sto." Literally it means: I'm not here, in this place, before what you're suggesting. In common usage, it means, instead: I don't agree, I don't want to. Rejection means shunning the games of those who crush the weak.)⁶³

Unlike Clarissa, Lila does not ask for the liberty to refuse. Rather, she arrogates it through her own erasure (as she had done—practiced—with her wedding photograph).⁶⁴ Ferrante's decision to frame disintegration in typographical terms is significant. It points to the ways in which erasure and self-erasure can coexist: this is most glaringly true toward the end of the second volume, when Lila burns *The Blue Fairy*. An unresolvable tension envelops the moment, a physical manifestation of Lila's tendency toward destruction that simultaneously carries clear overtones of immolation: if the dolls are the sacrificial objects that enable the story of a friendship, then the burning of *The Blue Fairy* insinuates itself as the necessary sacrifice for Elena's first novel to be published; just as the destruction of Lila's diaries was necessary for Elena to live in peace. And, of course, as Milkova states, "Lila's disappearance, her invisibility, is necessary for Elena's text to be born."⁶⁵ Ever a sacrifice, ever a transaction. The text thus becomes the charged site of contradiction in which creation and destruction coexist, another manifestation of the figure of the swing that Elena uses to describe her friendship with Lila.⁶⁶ This burning is a self-immolation as well if we consider that Lila burns her own manuscript, and

⁶³ Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 317; *Frantumaglia*, 327.

⁶⁴ Milkova makes the following point about Lila's destruction of her wedding photograph: "To destroy her image is to delete—and hence liberate—herself from the system which contains and controls her" (Stiliana Milkova, "Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics: Ekphrasis in *Troubling Love*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Story of a New Name*," in *The Works of Elena Ferrante Reconfiguring the Margins*, eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016], 176). Milkova's exploration of ekphrasis in Ferrante's novels is of great critical value, particularly her interest in the metaphor of framing as a form of entrapment. "The text," she writes, "links unambiguously framed art to marriage. The act of framing and enclosing within glass emblemizes Lila's imprisonment within her marriage with Stefano [...] The framing of her drawings does not posit her as an artist but rather signals her status as a commodity—an object to be acquired, framed, enjoyed, consumed" (ibid., 168). While I agree with this evaluation, and I borrow from Milkova in understanding Lila to be entrapped by a sort of framing, my argument in these pages is less visual than it is narratological; that is, Lila is confined within "a male dominated order" (ibid., 171), but she is also confined by Elena's storytelling. She is literally entrapped within the bounds of Elena's text, enclosed by the beginning and end of Elena's narrative. To understand this is crucial if we want to appreciate why her liberation can only be possible in the marginal epilogue. Only in it can Lila be freed.

⁶⁵ Milkova, "The Translator's Visibility," 171.

⁶⁶ "Era come se, per una cattiva magia, la gioia o il dolore dell'una presupponessero il dolore o la gioia dell'altra. Anche l'aspetto fisico, mi sembrò, partecipava a quell'altalena" (Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, 252; "It was as if, because of an evil spell, the joy or sorrow of one required the sorrow or joy of the other; even our physical aspect, it seemed to me, shared in that swing" [*My Brilliant Friend*, 257]).

as such represents a form of textual insurrection.⁶⁷ By erasing her text, Lila practices insurrection against the texts that she has inherited.

In the end, through her disappearance and through the return of the dolls, Lila arrogates the right to refuse. To refuse to be enclosed by the bounds of a patriarchal society, naturally, but also by the bounds of Elena's story. This arrogation makes possible the shift in the economy of desire that I mentioned above. By reinvigorating the text through the return of the dolls and its concomitant reactivation of textual energies in the epilogue, Lila reclaims, from the "space off," her desire, the autonomy that had been denied her through plotting. The novel, at the end, throws all its design and intention out the window. Over Elena's plotting has been superimposed a liberatory entropy, a movement away from the complexity of form and into the space of raw material free from constraints, unbound by textual formalizations.⁶⁸ Somewhat ironically, we find that, in this most plotted of novels, plot is overcome. *Da me no*. With these three words Lila proclaims her liberty to refuse from the space off. *Smarginata*, Lila becomes unbound.

⁶⁷ This could be interpreted as a reference to Virgil's purported wish to burn the *Aeneid*.

⁶⁸ Ferrante has been preoccupied with the issue of formlessness since *L'amore molesto* (*Troubling Love*). Wehling-Giorgi writes that "self-mutilation appears to stand as a form of reclaiming agency in Ferrante's novels, a way of appropriating conventional constructs of the female body as not only lack or absence, but *formlessness*" (Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, "Playing with the Maternal Body: Violence, Mutilation, and the Emergence of the Female Subject in Ferrante's Novels," *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 1 [2017]: 11). Erasure, too, would be a way to reclaim formlessness. If Milkova rightly states that Lila's final gesture is a form of "freeing herself from the frame of visual representation" (Milkova, "Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics," 168), I also contend that in this entropic ending, she frees herself from the frame of *narrative* representation. This brings her closer to Amelia, from *L'amore molesto*, yet distinguishes her from Olga, the protagonist of *I giorni dell'abbandono* (*The Days of Abandonment*), who undergoes a disintegrative process of unbinding or *squadernatura* only to recompose herself in the end through the act of plotting—contrary to the ending allotted to Lila. See Zarour Zarzar, "The Grammar of Abandonment in *I giorni dell'abbandono*," *Modern Language Notes* 135, no.1 (2020): 327–44.