Elena Ferrante, Art of Fiction No. 228

Interviewed by Sandro Ferri & Sandra Ferri

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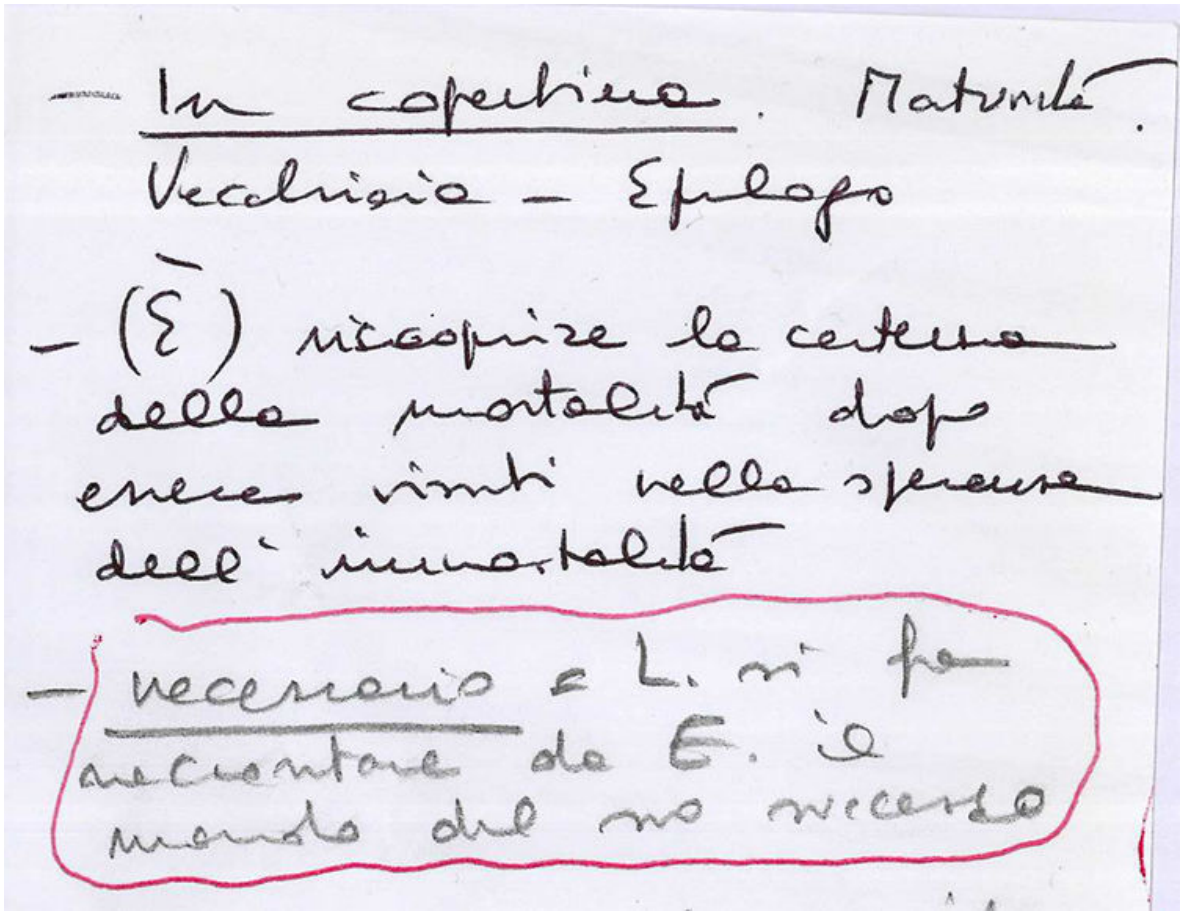

NOTES FROM ELENA FERRANTE'S FINAL REVISIONS TO *THE STORY OF THE LOST CHILD*.

Over the past ten years, the translation into English of Elena Ferrante's novels—including *Troubling Love*, *The Days of Abandonment*, *The Lost Daughter*, and the first three volumes of the tetralogy known in English as the Neapolitan Novels—have won her a passionate following outside her native Italy; the fourth of the Neapolitan Novels will appear in English, as *The Story of the Lost Child*, this fall. It is now common to hear Ferrante called the most important Italian writer of her generation, yet since the original publication of her first novel, *Troubling Love*, in 1992, she has rigorously protected her privacy and has declined to make public appearances. ("Elena Ferrante" is a pen name.) She has also refused to give any interviews over the telephone or in person, until now.

Her interviewers—her publishers, Sandro and Sandra Ferri, and their daughter, Eva—describe how the interview was conducted:

"Our conversation with Ferrante began in Naples. Our original plan was to visit the neighborhood depicted in the Neapolitan Novels, then walk along the seafront, but at the last moment Ferrante changed her mind about the neighborhood. Places of the imagination are visited in books, she said. Seen in reality they may be hard to recognize; they are disappointing,

they might even seem fake. We tried the seafront, but in the end, because it was a rainy evening, we retreated to the lobby of the Hotel Royal Continental, just opposite the Castel dell'Ovo.

"From here, out of the rain, we could every so often glimpse people passing along the street and imagine the characters who have for so long occupied our imaginations and our hearts. There was no particular need to meet in Naples, but Ferrante, who was in the city for family reasons, invited us and we took advantage of the occasion to celebrate the completion of *The Story of the Lost Child*. The conversation continued late into the night and resumed the next day over lunch (clams), then again in Rome, at our house (tea and tisane). At the end, each of us had a notebook full of notes. We compared them and reorganized the material according to Ferrante's directions."

INTERVIEWER

How do you begin a new work?

FERRANTE

I can't say precisely. I don't think anyone really knows how a story takes shape. When it's done you try to explain how it happened, but every effort, at least in my case, is insufficient. There is a *before*, made up of fragments of memory, and an *after*, when the story begins. But *before* and *after*, I have to admit, are useful only in answering your question now in an intelligible way.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by "fragments of memory"?

FERRANTE

You know how when you have in your head a few notes of a tune but you don't know what it is, and if you hum it, it ends up becoming a different song from the one that's nagging at you? Or when you remember a street corner but you can't remember where it is? That kind of thing. My mother liked to use the word *frantumaglia*—bits and pieces of uncertain origin which rattle around in your head, not always comfortably.

INTERVIEWER

And any of them could be the origin of a story?

FERRANTE

Yes and no. They might be separate and identifiable—childhood places, family members, schoolmates, insulting or tender voices, moments of great tension. And once you've found some sort of order, you start to narrate. But there's almost always something that doesn't work. It's as if from those splinters of a possible narrative come equal yet opposing forces that need to emerge clearly and, at the same time, to sink farther into the depths. Take *Troubling Love*—for years I had in my mind many stories about the periphery of Naples, where I was born and grew up. I had in my mind cries, crude family acts of violence I had witnessed as a child, domestic objects. I nourished Delia, the protagonist, on those memories. The figure of the mother, Amalia, on the other hand, appeared and immediately withdrew—she almost wasn't there. If I imagined Delia's body so much as brushing against her mother's, I felt ashamed and moved on to something else. Using that scattered material I wrote many stories over the years—short, long, very long, all in my eyes unsatisfying, and none having to do with the figure of the mother. Then, suddenly, many of

the fragments vanished, while others stuck together, all against the dark background of the mother-daughter relationship. Thus, in a couple of months, *Troubling Love* emerged.

INTERVIEWER

And *The Days of Abandonment*?

FERRANTE

Its birth certificate is even more vague. For years I had in mind a woman who closes the door of her house one night, and in the morning when she goes to open it she realizes she's no longer able to. Sometimes sick children came into it, sometimes a poisoned dog. Then, quite naturally, everything settled around an experience of mine that had seemed to me unspeakable—the humiliation of abandonment. But how I moved from the *frantumaglia* that I'd had in my mind for years to a sudden selection of fragments, welded into a story that seemed convincing—that escapes me, I can't give an honest account. I'm afraid that it's the same thing as with dreams. Even as you're recounting them, you know that you're betraying them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write down your dreams?

FERRANTE

The rare times that I seem to remember them, yes. I've done it since I was a girl. It's an exercise that I would recommend to everyone. To subject a dream experience to the logic of the waking state is an extreme test of writing. You can never reproduce a dream exactly. It's a losing battle. But putting into words the truth of a gesture, a feeling, a flow of events, without domesticating it, is also an operation that's not as simple as you might think.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by "domesticating the truth"?

FERRANTE

Taking overused expressive paths.

INTERVIEWER

In what sense?

FERRANTE

Betraying the story out of laziness, out of acquiescence, out of convenience, out of fear. It's always easy to reduce a story to clichés for mass consumption.

INTERVIEWER

James Wood and other critics have praised your writing for its sincerity. How do you define sincerity in literature? Is it something you especially value?

FERRANTE

As far as I'm concerned, it's the torment and, at the same time, the engine of every literary project. The most urgent question for a writer may seem to be, What experiences do I have as my material, what experiences do I feel able to narrate? But that's not right. The more pressing question is, What is the word, what is the rhythm of the sentence, what tone best suits the things I know? Without the right words, without long practice in putting them together, nothing comes out alive and true. It's not enough to say, as we increasingly do, These events truly happened, it's my real life, the names are the real ones, I'm describing the real places where the events occurred. If the writing is inadequate, it can falsify the most honest biographical truths. Literary truth is not the truth of the biographer or the reporter, it's not a police report or a sentence handed down by a court. It's not even the plausibility of a well-constructed narrative. Literary truth is entirely a matter of wording and is directly proportional to the energy that one is able to impress on the sentence. And when it works, there is no stereotype or cliché of popular literature that resists it. It reanimates, revives, subjects everything to its needs.

INTERVIEWER

How does one obtain this truth?

FERRANTE

It definitely comes from a certain skill that can always be improved. But to a great extent, that energy simply *appears*, it happens. It feels as if parts of the brain and of your entire body, parts that have been dormant, are enlarging your consciousness, making you more sensitive. You can't say how long it will last, you tremble at the idea that it might suddenly stop and leave you midstream. To be honest, you never know if you've developed the right style of writing, or if you've made the most out of it. Anyone who puts writing at the center of his life ends up in the situation of Dencombe, in Henry James's "The Middle Years," who, about to die, at the peak of success, hopes to have one more opportunity to test himself and discover if he can do better than what he's already done. Alternatively, he lives with the desperate feeling expressed in the exclamation of Proust's Bergotte when he sees Vermeer's little patch of yellow wall—"That is how I ought to have written."

INTERVIEWER

When was the first time you thought you had written the truth, in the sense you mean?

FERRANTE

Late, with *Troubling Love*. If that impression hadn't lasted, I wouldn't have published it.

INTERVIEWER

You said that you worked on that narrative material for a long time unsuccessfully.

FERRANTE

Yes, but that doesn't mean that *Troubling Love* was the product of a long period of effort. Quite the opposite. The effort was all spent on the unsatisfying stories that had preceded it over the years. They were obsessively worked-over pages, certainly truthful—or rather, they had a truth to them, but it was wrapped up inside more or less conventionally made stories about Naples, poverty, jealous males, and so on. Then all of a sudden the writing assumed the right tone, or at

least it seemed that way to me. I realized it from the first paragraph, and that the *writing* had told a story that until then I had never attempted, that I'd never even conceived—a story of love for the mother, an intimate, carnal love mixed with an equally carnal repulsion. Suddenly the story filtered out of the depths of memory, and I didn't have to look for words. Rather, it was the words that seemed to dislodge my most secret feelings. I decided to publish *Troubling Love* not so much because of the story it told, which continued to embarrass and frighten me, but because for the first time it seemed to me that I could say, Here's how I have to write.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean you have only one mode of writing? The question arises because quite a few Italian reviewers have attributed your books to different authors.

FERRANTE

Evidently, in a world where philological education has almost completely disappeared, where critics are no longer attentive to style, the decision not to be present as an author generates ill will and this type of fantasy. The experts stare at the empty frame where the image of the author is supposed to be and they don't have the technical tools, or, more simply, the true passion and sensitivity as readers, to fill that space with the works. So they forget that every individual work has its own story. Only the label of the name or a rigorous philological examination allows us to take for granted that the author of *Dubliners* is the same person who wrote *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. The cultural education of any high school student should include the idea that a writer adapts depending on what he or she needs to express. Instead, most people think anyone literate can write a story. They don't understand that a writer works hard to be flexible, to face many different trials, and without ever knowing what the outcome will be.

The writing of *Troubling Love* was for me a small miracle that came only after years of practice. It seemed to me I had achieved a style that was solid, lucid, very controlled, and yet open to sudden breakdowns. The satisfaction didn't last, however. It diminished, then it vanished. It took me ten years to separate my writing from that specific book, to turn my prose into a tool that I could use elsewhere, like a good solid chain that can pull up the full bucket from the very bottom of the well. I worked a lot, but only with *The Days of Abandonment* did I feel that I'd written another publishable text.

INTERVIEWER

When does a book seem publishable to you?

FERRANTE

When it tells a story that, for a long time, unintentionally, I had pushed away, because I didn't think I was capable of telling it, because telling it made me uncomfortable. Again, in the case of *The Days of Abandonment* the writing freed the story in a short time, over one summer. Actually, that was true for the first two parts. Then suddenly I began to make mistakes, I lost the tone. I wrote and rewrote the last part all that fall. It was a time of great anxiety. It doesn't take much to convince yourself that you've forgotten how to tell a story. I didn't know how to get Olga out of her crisis truthfully, as truthfully as I'd narrated her falling into it. The hand was the same, the writing was the same, there was the same choice of vocabulary, same syntax, same punctuation, and yet the tone had become false. For months I felt that the preceding pages were beyond my abilities, and now I no longer felt equal to my own work. It made me bitter. You'd rather lose yourself than find yourself, I thought. Then everything started up again. But even today I don't dare reread the book. I'm afraid that the last part has only the appearance of good writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think this anxiety of yours has something to do with being a woman? Do you have to work harder than a male writer, just to create work that isn't dismissed as being "for women"? Is there a difference between male and female writing?

FERRANTE

I'll answer with my own story. As a girl—twelve, thirteen years old—I was absolutely certain that a good book had to have a man as its hero, and that depressed me. That phase ended after a couple of years. At fifteen I began to write stories about brave girls who were in serious trouble. But the idea remained—indeed, it grew stronger—that the greatest *narrators* were men and that one had to learn to narrate like them. I devoured books at that age, and there's no getting around it, my models were masculine. So even when I wrote stories about girls, I wanted to give the heroine a wealth of experiences, a freedom, a determination that I tried to imitate from the great novels written by men. I didn't want to write like Madame de La Fayette or Jane Austen or the Brontës—at the time I knew very little about contemporary literature—but like Defoe or Fielding or Flaubert or Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky or even Hugo. While the models offered by women novelists were few and seemed to me for the most part thin, those of male novelists were numerous and almost always dazzling. That phase lasted a long time, until I was in my early twenties, and it left profound effects.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think female fiction is constitutionally weak?

FERRANTE

Not at all. I'm talking about my adolescent anxieties. For obvious historical reasons, women's writing has a less dense and varied tradition than male writing, but it has extremely high points and also an extraordinary foundational value—just think of Jane Austen. The twentieth century, besides, was a century of radical change for women. Feminist thought and practice set in motion the deepest, most radical of the many transformations that took place in the last century. I wouldn't recognize myself without women's struggles, women's nonfiction, women's literature—they made me an adult. My experience as a novelist, both published and unpublished, culminated, after twenty years, in the attempt to relate, in a writing that was appropriate, my sex and its difference. But if we have to cultivate *our* narrative tradition, as women, that doesn't mean we should renounce the entire stock of techniques we have behind us. We have to show that we can construct worlds that are not only as wide and powerful and rich as those constructed by men but more so. We have to be well equipped, we have to dig deep into our difference, using advanced tools. Above all, we have to insist on the greatest freedom. Writers should be concerned only with narrating what they know and feel—beautiful, ugly, or contradictory—without succumbing to ideological conformity or blind adherence to a canon. Writing requires maximum ambition, maximum audacity, and programmatic disobedience.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you see that in your own work?

FERRANTE

In the book that made me feel most guilty, *The Lost Daughter*, I pushed the protagonist much further than I thought I myself could bear. Leda says, "The hardest things to talk about are the

ones we ourselves can't understand." It's the motto—can I call it that?—at the root of all my books. The "I" who narrates my stories is never a voice giving a monologue. It's always a woman writing, and this writer always struggles to organize, in a text, what she knows but doesn't have clear in her mind. Most of my narrators—Delia, Olga, or Elena—make a difficult journey, then arrive at the end of the story bruised but safe. Leda, on the other hand, is led to tell truths that are unbearable to her as a daughter and as a mother and as the friend of another woman. Above all, she has to account for a reckless gesture—the heart of the story—whose meaning escapes her and that surely she can't decipher. There I demanded of myself more than I could easily give—a gripping story whose meaning the narrator is unable to understand, a story that might kill her if she understood it. Of all my fiction, *The Lost Daughter* is the one I'm most painfully attached to.

INTERVIEWER

You insist on the centrality of the prose, calling it a chain that pulls water up from the bottom of a well. How do you make this chain?

FERRANTE

I only know one thing for certain—it seems to me that I work well when I can start from a flat, dry tone, that of a strong, lucid, educated woman, as many middle-class women are today. At the beginning I need curtness, a terse, clear, unaffected language, without ornamentation. Only when the story begins to emerge safely, thanks to that tone, do I begin to wait for the moment when I'll be able to replace those well-oiled, quiet links with something rustier, raspier, and with a pace that's disjointed and agitated, even at the growing risk of the story falling apart. The moment I change register for the first time is both exciting and anguished. I enjoy breaking through my character's armor of good education and good manners. I enjoy upsetting her self-image, her will, and revealing another, rougher soul underneath, someone raucous, maybe even crude. I work hard to make that change in register come as a surprise and also to make it seem natural when we go back to a more serene style of narration. That first change comes easily. I wait for that moment and am happy to slip inside it, whereas I fear the moment when the narrative has to recompose itself. I always worry that the narrating "I" won't be able to calm back down, or that, if she does, the reader will no longer believe in that transitory calm.

INTERVIEWER

Your openings have often been praised, especially by English and American critics. Do they have to do with this alternation of tranquil narration and sudden breaks?

FERRANTE

I think so. From the first lines, I strive for a tone that is placid but with unexpected wrinkles. I've done this in all my books except where there's a sort of prologue, as in *The Lost Daughter* and *My Brilliant Friend*. These, by nature, are less interesting. But whenever I get to the real start of the story, I tend toward an expansive sentence that has a cold surface and, visible underneath it, a magma of unbearable heat. I want readers to know from the first lines what they will have to deal with.

INTERVIEWER

Are you concerned with your readers? Do you care about the effect your writing will have on them?

FERRANTE

I publish to be read. It's the only thing that interests me about publication. So I employ all the strategies I know to capture the reader's attention, stimulate curiosity, make the page as dense as possible and as easy as possible to turn. But once I have the reader's attention I feel it is my right to pull it in whichever direction I choose. I don't think the reader should be indulged as a consumer, because he isn't one. Literature that indulges the tastes of the reader is a degraded literature. My goal is to disappoint the usual expectations and inspire new ones.

INTERVIEWER

Traditionally, the novel has been concerned with maintaining narrative tension, but in the twentieth century this changed. Which direction is literature taking in the twenty-first century?

FERRANTE

I think of literary tradition as a single, large depository, where anyone who wants to write goes to choose what is useful to him. An ambitious novelist has a duty, now more than ever, to have a vast literary culture. We need to be like Diderot, the author of both *The Nun* and *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*—capable, that is, of reusing both Fielding and Sterne. I renounce nothing that can give pleasure to the reader, not even what is considered old, trite, vulgar, not even the devices of genre fiction. As I was saying, what makes everything new and valuable is literary truth. If a novel has that—and no trick of marketing can do the job—it needs nothing else, it can continue on its way, drawing its readers along, even, if necessary, into its opposite, the antinovel.

INTERVIEWER

Many American reviews seem to make a direct connection between the work you do writing—its sincerity, its honesty—and your keeping out of the public eye. As if to say, the less one appears, the better one writes.

FERRANTE

Two decades are a long time, and the reasons for the decisions I made in 1990, when we first considered my need to avoid the rituals of publication, have changed. Back then, I was frightened at the thought of having to come out of my shell. Timidity prevailed. Later, I came to feel hostility toward the media, which doesn't pay attention to books themselves and values a work according to the author's reputation. It's surprising, for example, how the most widely admired Italian writers and poets are also known as scholars or are employed in high-level editorial jobs or in other prestigious fields. It's as if literature were not capable of demonstrating its seriousness simply through texts, but required "external" credentials. In a similar category—if we leave the university or the publisher's office—are the literary contributions of politicians, journalists, singers, actors, directors, television producers, et cetera. Here, too, the works do not find in themselves authorization for their existence but need a pass that comes from work done in other fields. "I'm a success in this or that field, I've acquired an audience, and *therefore* I wrote and published a novel." It's not the book that counts, but the aura of its author. If the aura is already there, and the media reinforces it, the publishing world is happy to open its doors and the market is very happy to welcome you. If it's not there but the book miraculously sells, the media *invents* the author, so the writer ends up selling not only his work but also himself, his image.

INTERVIEWER

You were saying that the reasons for staying in the shadows have changed a bit.

FERRANTE

I'm still very interested in testifying against the self-promotion obsessively imposed by the media. This demand for self-promotion diminishes the actual work of art, whatever that art may be, and it has become universal. The media simply can't discuss a work of literature without pointing to some writer-hero. And yet there is no work of literature that is not the fruit of tradition, of many skills, of a sort of collective intelligence. We wrongfully diminish this collective intelligence when we insist on there being a single protagonist behind every work of art. The individual person is, of course, necessary, but I'm not talking about the individual—I'm talking about a manufactured image.

What has never lost importance for me, over these two and a half decades, is the creative space that absence opened up for me. Once I knew that the completed book would make its way in the world without me, once I knew that nothing of the concrete, physical me would ever appear beside the volume—as if the book were a little dog and I were its master—it made me see something new about writing. I felt as though I had released the words from myself.

INTERVIEWER

Before you made the decision to write anonymously, had you been censoring yourself?

FERRANTE

No, self-censoring doesn't enter into it. I wrote for a long time without the intention of publishing or having others read what I was writing. That trained me not to censor myself. What I mean is that removing the author—as understood by the media—from the result of his writing creates a space that wasn't there before. Starting with *The Days of Abandonment*, it seemed to me, the emptiness created by my absence was filled by the writing itself.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean?

FERRANTE

I'll try to state it from the reader's point of view, which was summarized well by Meghan O'Rourke in the *Guardian*. O'Rourke wrote that the reader's relationship to a writer who chooses to separate herself, radically, from her own book "is like that which we have with a fictional character. We think we know her, but what we know are her sentences, the patterns of her mind, the path of her imagination." It may seem like a small thing, but to me it's big. It has become natural to think of the author as a particular individual who exists, inevitably, outside the text—so that if we want to know more about what we're reading we should address that individual, or find out everything about his more or less banal life. Remove that individual from the public eye and, as O'Rourke says, we discover that the text contains more than we imagine. It has taken possession of the person who writes. If we want to find that person, she's right there, revealing a self that even she may not truly know. When one offers oneself to the public purely and simply through an act of writing—which is all that really counts—this anonymity turns into part of the story or the verse, part of the fiction.

INTERVIEWER

You mean that while the media might try to fill up the empty space with gossip, readers can just turn to the books themselves?

FERRANTE

Yes. But I also mean that, if this is true, the task of the writer is enhanced. If there is a lacuna out there in the social or media world, an empty space that for the sake of convention I call Elena Ferrante, then I, Elena Ferrante, can and should exert myself—am obliged by my curiosity as a novelist, by the craving to test myself—to fill that empty space using the text. How? By giving the reader enough so that he can distinguish me from the narrator narrating "I," whom I call Elena Greco, and yet can also find me in the story that narrator tells and in the vividness and authenticity of the prose. If the author doesn't exist outside the text, inside the text she offers herself, *consciously adds herself* to the story, exerting herself to be truer than she could be in the photos of a Sunday supplement, at a book launch, at a literary festival, in some television broadcast, receiving a literary prize. The passionate reader must be allowed to extract the author's physiognomy from every word or grammatical violation or syntactical knot in the text, just as the reader will extract the sense of a character, a landscape, a feeling, or an action. So the writing becomes intimate both for the one who produces it and for the one who enjoys it.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to talk about the tetralogy, the Neapolitan Novels. The relationship between Lila and Elena doesn't seem invented, or even narrated by means of standard techniques. It seems to have come directly from the unconscious.

FERRANTE

The Neapolitan Novels didn't have to make their way like the other stories in the *frantumaglia*. From the start I had the sensation, completely new for me, that everything was already in place. Maybe that was the result of the connection with *The Lost Daughter*. There, for example, the figure of Nina, the young mother who fascinates Leda, was already central.

But it seems pointless to make a list of the more or less conscious connections that I see between my books. The theme of female friendship certainly has something to do with a childhood friend of mine, whom I wrote about some time ago in the *Corriere della Sera*, a few years after her death. That's the first written trace of the friendship between Lila and Elena. And then I have a small private gallery—stories, luckily, unpublished—of uncontrollable girls and women, repressed by their men, by their environment, bold and yet weary, always a step away from disappearing into their mental *frantumaglia*. They converge in the figure of Amalia, the mother in *Troubling Love*—who shares many features with Lila, if I think about it, including a lack of boundaries.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think so many readers recognize themselves in both Elena and Lila, in spite of their profoundly different natures? Does it have to do with the differences between the two?

FERRANTE

Much of the story depends on the differences between Elena and Lila. These can all be traced back to the changing condition of women. Take reading and studying, for instance. Elena is extremely disciplined. She diligently takes up the tools she needs, she recounts her journey as an intellectual with a certain pride, she shows an intense engagement with the world. She also likes to emphasize that Lila has remained behind. Elena is always insisting that she has outdistanced Lila. But every so often her story breaks down and Lila appears much more active, above all more ferociously—I would say also, more viscerally—involved. But then she truly withdraws, leaving the field to her

friend. What you called a difference is an oscillation innate in the relationship between the two characters and in the very structure of Elena's story. That's why women readers—men, too, I think—can identify with both women. If this oscillation were not there, the two friends would be doubles of each other, by turns they would appear as a secret voice, an image in the mirror, or something else. But it's not that way. When Lila's pace becomes unsustainable, the reader grabs onto Elena. But if Elena falls apart, then the reader relies on Lila.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned disappearance—it's one of your recurring themes.

FERRANTE

It's a feeling I know well. I think all women know it. Whenever a part of you emerges that's not consistent with some feminine ideal, it makes everyone nervous, and you're supposed to get rid of it in a hurry. Or if you have a combative nature, like Amalia, like Lila, if you refuse to be subjugated, violence enters in. Violence has, at least in Italian, a meaningful language of its own—smash your face, bash your face in. You see? These are expressions that refer to the forced manipulation of identity, to its cancellation. Either you'll be the way I say, or I'll change you by beating you till I kill you.

INTERVIEWER

But your characters are sometimes the ones who "cancel" themselves. Amalia may have killed herself. And Lila can't be found. Why? Are these acts of surrender?

FERRANTE

There are many reasons to disappear. The disappearance of Amalia, of Lila—yes, maybe it's a surrender. But it's also, I think, a sign of their irreducibility. I'm not sure. While I'm writing I think I know a lot about my characters, but then I discover I know much less than my readers. The extraordinary thing about the written word is that by nature it can do without your presence and also, in many respects, without your intentions.

The voice is part of your body, it needs your presence. You speak, you have a dialogue, you correct, you give further explanations. Writing, on the other hand, only needs a reader. It doesn't need you.

INTERVIEWER

What is your relationship with plot, and how much, in the Neapolitan Novels, did it change along the way?

FERRANTE

Most of a plot comes to me when I'm writing. That's always the case. I know, for example, that Olga will remain locked in her house, without a telephone, with her sick son, her daughter, and the poisoned dog. But I don't know what will happen then. It's the act of writing that pulls me along—and it has to pull me seriously, in the sense that it has to involve me, agitate me—from the moment the door doesn't open to the moment it opens as if it had never been locked. Naturally, I speculate about the development, before and while I write, but I keep these speculations in my head, in some confusion, ready to abandon them as the story advances. A plot twist can lose substance simply because I can't keep it to myself and describe it to a friend. The oral story

immediately destroys everything—however remarkable the development I had in mind, from that moment it doesn't seem worth the trouble of writing down. In the case of Lila and Lenù, however, the plot unfolded naturally, and I rarely changed course.

INTERVIEWER

Some of your stories have the pace of thrillers, but then they become love stories or something else again.

FERRANTE

I use plots, yes, but, I have to say, I can't respect the rules of genres—the reader who reads me hoping for a thriller or a love story or a bildungsroman would surely be disappointed. Only the thread of events interests me. In the Neapolitan Novels, the plot avoided every kind of trap set by fixed rules and convention.

INTERVIEWER

And yet the Neapolitan Novels are very complex books.

FERRANTE

It didn't feel that way. When, almost six years ago, I began to write it, I already had the story in my head, though I had in mind a story no longer than *Troubling Love* or *The Lost Daughter*. I didn't have to go looking for the heart of the narrative. As soon as I began to write, it seemed to me that the writing went smoothly.

INTERVIEWER

What does it mean when the writing goes smoothly?

FERRANTE

It means I don't have to pay much attention to the individual words or sentences. I have unpublished stories where the attention to form was inordinate, where I couldn't go on if every line didn't seem perfect. When that happens, the page may be beautiful but the story is false. Often enough, a story develops, I like it, in general I finish it, and yet the narrative gives me no pleasure. The pleasure—I soon discover—was all in refining the expression, in maniacally polishing the sentences. The greater the attention to the sentence, the more laboriously the story flows. The state of grace comes when the writing is entirely at the service of the story. With the Neapolitan Novels, that happened immediately, and it lasted. Months passed, the story spun out rapidly, I didn't even try to reread what I had written. For the first time, in my experience, memory and imagination provided me with more and more material and, instead of crowding the story and confusing me, that material arranged itself in a sort of tranquil crush, ready to be used.

INTERVIEWER

In that state of grace, the writing emerges without corrections and reworkings?

FERRANTE

The writing no, but the story yes. And that happens when you have the story making lots of noise in your head and you continue to write as if under dictation, even when you do the shopping, even

when you eat, even in your sleep. Then the story—as long as it keeps going—has no need of reorganization. For all sixteen hundred pages of the Neapolitan Novels, I never felt the need to restructure events, characters, feelings, turning points, reversals. And yet, I am amazed myself, since the story is so long, so rich in characters who develop over a long period of time—I never resorted to notes, chronologies, plans of any sort. I must say, however, that that is not unusual. I've always detested preparatory work. If I try to do it, the desire to write passes, I feel that I can no longer surprise or excite myself. Everything important happens while I'm actually writing. Then a moment comes when I need to catch my breath. I stop, reread, and try to improve the prose, which is a pleasure. In the previous books that moment would come after, I don't know, two or three pages, ten at most. In the Neapolitan Novels, I could go on for fifty or a hundred pages without rereading.

INTERVIEWER

Attention to form seems to have an ambiguous value for you, both positive and negative.

FERRANTE

Yes, beauty of form, at least in my experience, can become an obsession that hides more complex problems—the story doesn't work, I can't find the right way, I've lost faith in my knowledge of how to tell a story. Then there are times when nothing matters but getting the story down. That is the most joyful moment, when I know the narrative is underway, and all I have to do is make it flow better.

INTERVIEWER

How do you do that?

FERRANTE

I look back at what I've done. I get rid of redundancies, I fill in what seems barely sketched, and I explore paths that the text itself now suggests to me. Then, once I finish the story, I give it a really thorough going-over. There will be various drafts and corrections, reworkings, new inserts, until a few hours before the book goes to press. In that phase I become sensitive to every detail of daily life. I see an effect of light and make a note of it. I see a plant in a meadow and try not to forget it. I make lists of words, I write down phrases I hear on the street. I work a lot—on the proofs, too—and there is nothing that can't, at the last moment, end up in the story, become an element in a landscape, the second term of a simile, a metaphor, a new dialogue, the unexpected and yet not outlandish adjective I was looking for.

INTERVIEWER

But while you're still writing the book, the story can change direction?

FERRANTE

Yes. It's a relief to have some pages, when before there was nothing. The places are places, the people are people, what they do or don't do is there, it happens. And all this, as one looks it over, demands to be perfected, to be increasingly vivid and true. So the way I read what I've done is by rewriting. At this stage, I must say it's always seemed to me that skill truly plays a part. It's like a second wave, but less laborious, less anxious, and yet—if the pages don't disappoint me—even more absorbing.

INTERVIEWER

Why was it so different writing the Neapolitan Novels?

FERRANTE

Well, in the first place, I had never thought I would ever write anything so long. Second, I didn't imagine that such an extensive historical period, so full of changes, could affect the characters' lives in such an explicit way. Third, I would never have dreamed of managing so many minor figures. Fourth, out of personal distaste, I'd never wanted to write about social climbing or the acquisition of cultural and political status or the enduring weight of class origins. My themes and also my abilities seemed of a different nature. In this case, the historical period slipped naturally into the characters' gestures, thoughts, and choices about life. As for the minor characters, it seemed natural for each one to have his moment, good or bad, in the lives of the protagonists, then to slip into the background, just as when we think back on our existence and remember almost nothing about most of the many people who have entered the flow of our lives. As for my distaste for politics and sociology, I discovered that it was a screen, behind which lurked the pleasure—yes, the pleasure—of narrating what I would call a sort of female alienation-inclusion.

INTERVIEWER

What does that mean, "alienation-inclusion"?

FERRANTE

I felt Elena and Lila were alienated from history in all its political, social, economic, cultural aspects—and yet they were part of history in everything they said or did. That alienation-inclusion seemed to lie outside the narrative frame. It seemed hard to include in the story. So of course I decided to try. I wanted the historical period to be a faintly defined background, but also to emerge from the characters' lives, from their uncertainties, decisions, actions, language. Even the tiniest false note would have been enough to stop me. But the writing continued to glide along, and I almost always felt certain—wrongly or rightly—that the tone gave those small facts the ring of truth, and that this ring of truth helped bring the larger historical facts to life, to make them less worn, less trite.

INTERVIEWER

A last question. Lila's writing is intensely present in the story and influences Elena from childhood. What are the characteristics of that writing?

FERRANTE

We'll never know if Lila's few texts really have the power that Elena attributes to them. What we do know is, rather, how they generate a sort of model that Elena tries to follow all her life. She tells us something about that model, but that's not what matters. What matters is that, without Lila, Elena wouldn't exist as a writer.