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# A Problem of Middlebrow Style: Dialect and Translation in Elena Ferrante's Naples Tetralogy

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## ABSTRACT

How does the Bakhtinian model of novelistic discourse, which conceives of dialects as styles and styles as dialects, appear in the age of world literature and world English? If the style of the contemporary world-novel is purposely drained of heteroglossia, it risks complicity with a frictionless communicability. This essay argues that, despite its magmatically latent energy, the near-complete absence of *napoletano* in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels emphasises a refusal both to utter and be uttered by dialectal delinquency. Canonical writers such as Verga, Svevo, Pasolini and Ginzburg had responded to the extraordinary rapidity with which dialects were largely subsumed by spoken as well as written Italian. Yet Ferrante prompts new questions about how the global cultures of reception are gendered. Resisting the masculinist performance of a named style, she pseudonymously embraces the sensibility of the feminised 'middlebrow', a category now conceived as immersive and cognitively complex. Under such conditions, the *questione linguistica* is confronted in narrative: its evasion in language marks both the constraints and possibilities of pan-feminist translatability in the 'world lit' economy.

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## Introduction

The problem with the stylistic analysis of novels up to the 1920s, Bakhtin thought, was that it described the language of the novelist rather than the languages of the novel. This emphasis on private craftsmanship presupposed the unity of authorial style, mistakenly treating the novelist's individualised style as synonymous with that of the poet. The style of the poet can potentially be established as a culturally-unifying, symbolic language of the nation. The novel, characterised by its double-voiced dependency on the linguistic 'other', should rather be seen as an interanimating system of

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languages, or images of languages. What Bakhtin names the ‘novelist’s individual dialect’ may ventriloquise the literary accents of an esteemed poetic style-of-the-nation but it is always dialogically conditioned by its vernaculars. In its internal stratification, its dispersion of a unitary language into social dialects (‘rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia’), the novel manifests the forces of discursive disunification.<sup>1</sup> The written word is always oriented towards an alien utterance within the ‘verbal-ideological’ or ‘socio-ideological’ nation-state. In the novel as theorised by Bakhtin, dialects are styles and styles are dialects.

In what ways does this Bakhtinian model of novelistic discourse apply to the age of world literature and world English? The global novel may not yet be quite post-national but it speaks in a new kind of transnational literary discourse whose emphasis is on smooth transmissibility. The novel may now typically emerge from polyglot conditions – in Rebecca Walkowitz’s term, as fiction which is ‘born-translated’ – but it often internally translates its refractory linguistic ‘other’, its sociolectal remainders, clearing the way to a fully commercialised relationship with a world literature readership.<sup>2</sup> The potential suppression or commodification of the styles and dialects of novelistic heteroglossia in the world-system sits uneasily with the constitutive properties of the novel as Bakhtin conceived them. The linguistic no-place of transnational-translational novelese is, we might say, the negative image of Barthes’s *atopia*, that blissful free play of the classification-denying signifier. The contemporary world-novel risks, rather, a complicit mode of ‘neutral’ communication: an unaccented *lingua franca* drained of social heteroglossia. Pre-emptive translatability masks the dialogic interanimation within language. It poses a contemporary problem of style.

This essay explores this problem in relation to the role of dialect in Elena Ferrante’s Naples tetralogy. Despite the very occasional vulgarity (*tàmmaro, ca chillu strunz, mo’ te lo faccio sentire*), Ferrante does not even go so far as to ‘season’ the novels with the exotic spice of the Neapolitan dialect, to use Brian Lennon’s uncomplimentary metaphor.<sup>3</sup> The near-complete absence of *napoletano* from the Italian pages is certainly a surprise, considering its oppressive symbolic presence as a linguistic force – or rather, counterforce. The exclusion initially suggests that Ferrante is damming up those Bakhtinian rivulets of social heteroglossia in the service of the commercially viable ‘world lit’ novel. The reader may entertain a certain scepticism about this linguistic erasure, but must be wary of exclusionary hostility to the literary mode of the middlebrow. It is indeed profitable to see Ferrante as a middlebrow writer, I would argue, but not in the interwar context of British culture and its polarised and class-fearing ‘battle of the brows’. The work of Nicola Humble and Diana Holmes, amongst many others, now argues for the ‘intelligent passion’ of middlebrow reading and the cognitive complexity of immersion and empathetic identification which need not be conceived as naïve and pre-modernist.<sup>4</sup>

This recent rearticulation of a sophisticated middlebrow sensibility well describes the critical reception of Ferrante's novels, particularly as the middlebrow is primarily though not exclusively associated with the majority of readers. It is gendered feminine because most readers of fiction are women. If the intrinsically metafictional narrative structure of Ferrante's work (the author known as 'Elena Ferrante' writing as a successful Neapolitan author called Elena Greco) is registered, this can be brought within a reclaimed definition of the middlebrow as a mode which strategically hybridizes the low and the high. It is in the light of such re-evaluations of the sophisticated middlebrow that this essay gathers together a number of elements – Ferrante's suspicion of style, her resistance to the fetish of beautification, her transgression of genre-boundaries, her commercial popularity within the system of world literature – and sets them beside the curious occlusion of Neapolitan dialect in her writing, an absence which itself must be seen in the context of the literary history of the Italian nation-state.

### **I am me/ am other: dialect and style**

For Ferrante, as for her narrator Lenù, the sole way to be Italian is to write in Italian: to represent the linguistic nationality for which she has striven. The recurrent naming but effacing of the Neapolitan dialect emphasises a refusal both to utter and be uttered by dialectal delinquency.<sup>5</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle has suggested that the conformist interpellation of style can be resisted by a *counter*-interpellative style, whose idiolectal singularity subjectivises the constrictive dominant style through innovative, rule-breaking minoration.<sup>6</sup> There is little evidence of Ferrante deterritorialising her standard Italian or disturbing this *lisibilité* with such counter-interpellative friction, though. This goes alongside her negation of dialect and seems to leave intact the ideology of a functional, obligatory style: Italian.

This internal translation may seem to leave Ferrante vulnerable to the charge that her fiction is collusive with the monolithic, difference-erasing forces of 'glocal' literary production. But such knee-jerk suspicion imputes irreconcilable motives to the exclusion of dialect. If it is regarded as an undiagnosed symptom, the pathological expulsion of the filthy undesired object, this can hardly be accommodated with characterisations of Ferrante as an arch pragmatist, highly conscious of clearing the path to future translation. As part of its meticulous period reconstruction, the recent television adaptation restored 1950s dialect-speaking, adding *Italian* subtitles for many non-Neapolitan Italians and foreigners alike. Prestige television now bears the cultural burden of dialect which middlebrow fiction, it seems, cannot. The screen restoration of dialect also reifies and commodifies it, making manifest and marketable what remains mysteriously latent in the novels.

Further, those discussions which fixate on Ferrante's anonymity, or those which draw attention to the supposed infelicities of her prose, indicate that the author's refusal to appear in person under the publicly gendered name of style has been well founded. Joanna Biggs suggests that the Neapolitan novels are 'delivered in a style that's more of an admission that the author cares too much about the truth to bother with style [...] It's a style that doesn't seem like one'.<sup>7</sup> Ferrante's 'not bothering with style' marks a resistance to the performance of style on the world literature circuit and the renunciation of a masculinised type of narcissistic, high-brow style. Like Lenù, the celebrated writer presumably relishes the international translation of the books and is unconcerned that her style should be burnished or finished in a series of verbal artefacts. Ferrante's implied reader requires a purposively translatable, pan-feminist *koiné* addressed primarily to a female readership, to the symbolic mother, daughter and sister. Middlebrow style is to translate and be translated without shame and does not stand for a cynically strategic collusion with the monoglossia of the 'world lit' economy.

Yet the absence of *napoletano* is surprising because of its ceaseless polemical energy in the novels. There are very few novelistic images of the dialect, no dialect in intonational quotation marks, and very little overt hybridising or intermingling of Italian and dialect. There is no attempt to write a creolised prose, a filtered or dialectalised Italian. The national language is superimposed upon and makes invisible *napoletano*, the hetero-glot, the other tongue. In that struggle for individuation with the other's discourse, Ferrante implies that a dialect may have once held sway, as Bakhtin puts it, but is now on the outside, though still a determining force, a dialogising background. Lenù is a centrifugal female subject, one who leaves, but her linguistic subjectivity is centripetal, moving towards an Italian which homogenises and hierarchises, resisting rather than relishing the heteroglossic misrule of the novel as genre. Let us take as an example the moment when the narrator Lenù identifies the linguistic problem between herself and Lila in *Storia della bambina perduta* (*The Story of the Lost Child*):

Mi venne in mente che fosse ormai una questione linguistica. Lei ricorreva all'italiano come a una barriera, io cercavo di spingerla verso il dialetto, la nostra lingua della franchezza. Ma mentre il suo italiano era tradotto dal dialetto, il mio dialetto era sempre più tradotto dall'italiano, e parlavamo entrambe una lingua finta. Bisognava invece che sbottasse, che le parole diventassero incontrollate. Volevo che dicesse nel napoletano sincero della nostra infanzia: che cazzo vuoi, Lenù, sto così perché ho perso mia figlia, e forse è viva, forse è morta ... (344)

It occurred to me that it was now a linguistic question. She resorted to Italian as if to a barrier; I tried to push her toward dialect, our language of candor. But while her Italian was translated from dialect, my dialect was increasingly

translated from Italian, and we both spoke a false language. She needed to explode, lose control of the words. I wanted her to say in the authentic Neapolitan of our childhood: What the fuck do you want, Lenù, I'm like this because I lost my daughter, and maybe she's alive, maybe she's dead ... (362)

The authentic Neapolitan of which the narrator speaks so passionately is invisible in the original Italian as well as the English translation. In the Italian itself there is no juxtaposition on the page of language and dialect; dialect has already been translated into an uncomplicated standard Italian. Lenù's dialect, native and once habitual, is ever more translated from educated Italian; conversely, Lila shields her *napoletano* by translating it into the acquired language of Italian. Both speak *lingue finte* or fake languages, pushing each other to the other language, the heteroglot, the language of control or that of chaos. This state of bilingualism – more precisely, diglossia – is a key part of the tetralogy's structure of doubling and mutuality, its movements of fusion and fission, its inscriptions of subjectivity. There is both linguistic tension and thematic equilibrium in the many stand-offs between *lingua* and *dialetto*. Lenù and Lila are secret sharers or split selves: she who leaves, she who stays; she who speaks Italian, she who speaks dialect. Ferrante constantly registers though does not relish the dialogical principle of novelistic discourse – that, as Bakhtin puts it, the narrator says “I am me” in someone else's language, and in [her] own language, “I am other”.<sup>8</sup>

Ferrante's *questione linguistica* is a dialect question always posed in Italian. When we expect to see dialect on the page, it is largely avoided. When Lenù goes back to Naples after living in the north, her re-introduction into the *rione* is narrated as follows: ‘Appena scendevo dal treno, mi muovevo con cautela nei luoghi dove ero cresciuta, badando a parlare sempre in dialetto come per segnalare *sono dei vostri, non mi fate male*’ (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 17) [‘As soon as I got off the train, I moved cautiously in the places where I had grown up, always careful to speak in dialect, as if to indicate *I am one of yours, don't hurt me*’ (*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 26)].<sup>9</sup> Italicisation appears to stage the separation of the dialect, emphasising that Lenù is walking around her neighbourhood, claiming kinship with her fellow Neapolitans and speaking in their (her) language. But the demarcated speech, her mother tongue, is translated into Italian. Even when Lila wields dialect as a meta-linguistic weapon, such as in her parody of Lenù's pseudo-intellectual *cocoricò* (or parrot-chatter) and theory-laden sloganeering, this mockery is retrospectively supervised by the controlling narrator. Whatever language battles she may lose against Lila as an aspirational high school student, the narrator will always belatedly win the psycho-linguistic war. The regularity of the marker ‘*disse in dialetto*’ may signal the presence of dialect but also its elimination.

Over the course of many hundreds of pages, Neapolitan words, phrases, grammatical constructions and syntactic imitations appear only occasionally, giving the reader a vague impression of dialect. But these are quite outweighed by examples in which the speaking of dialect is reported as a second-order description of language, an absent object-language.<sup>10</sup> Readers of the texts in translation, perhaps assuming that the translator has smoothed out dialectal difficulty in the source text, may not grasp how linguistic control has already been exercised through a prior act of intra-national translation. Viewed as a practical obstacle to be overcome, the marginalisation of dialect may be thought unremarkable, as it is typical of how much regional fiction communicates to its national audience. Ferrante's translator into English, Ann Goldstein, has speculated that Ferrante writes in this way so that other Italians can understand what her characters say, and also because the dialect loses its power when written on the page.<sup>11</sup> The pre-emptive translation of dialect is also to be understood in relation to Ferrante's impact on the markets of world literature. Reading Ferrante in translation is to be subject to two acts of translation, not one. The author removes the problem of her original dialect, with the result that her translator is not faced with the awkward task of representing one dialect with another – say, of having Lila speak in Glaswegian or Bronx. This would risk the sort of exoticising which, in Antoine Berman's view, risks ridiculing the source dialect.<sup>12</sup>

Ferrante's Italian has been the object of some critical discontent, as if confirming that it is not the 'poetic' language of the nation but a supranational *lingua franca* within the 'world lit' complex.<sup>13</sup> Stylistic carelessness is laid not at the door of the translator but of the aspiring global novelist who treats prose as a blunt instrument. In this view, continued enjoyment of Ferrante's fiction means suspending the aesthetic criterion of style as taste, and of trying not to find the unexceptional sentence exceptional. The exclusion of dialect, it follows, would confirm Ferrante's need for transmission and translatability within a national *and* global literary market. But such a view does not account for how dialect exerts an uncanny force in the novels. Tiziana de Rogatis has pointed to how the 'filtering-out' of dialect does not neutralise but rather intensifies *napoletano*: 'Neapolitan keeps its jewels hidden'.<sup>14</sup> This powerful latency allows readers to project their own imagination into the vacated linguistic space. Dialect is a site both of pre-linguistic abjection and readerly fantasy only to be found in the metaphorical depths: Lenù is Orpheus, descending into the underworld, or she is a scuba diver breaking the surface of remembered Naples, in need of decompression. Moreover, continues de Rogatis, by not writing in Neapolitan Ferrante casts off certain unwanted cultural associations: the love song, the comic masquerade, crime fiction, an experimental and newly ironic, 'meta-reflexive' Neapolitan.<sup>15</sup> The exportable image of a confident civic vernacular

with a distinguished past does not reflect the patois of the post-war childhood *periferia*: it is not her Naples or her *napoletano*.

In this respect, Ferrante's hostility to dialect and resistance to linguistic nostalgia mean that dialect cannot be written in, although, because of its influence on her formation, it must be written *of*. Her unwillingness to subvert the major narrating language of Italian with forms of territorially-determined Neapolitan minoration is based on an elective identification with the national language. Ferrante has claimed that for her being Italian 'begins and ends' with her speaking and writing in the Italian language; that Italian is 'the *only way*' she is willing to attribute nationality to herself. Despite the exaggerated narrative instrumentality of Italian in these novels, her affiliation to the *lingua* does not express a broader sense of cultural *italianità*. Nationality is solely linguistic. Ferrante's vision is of translation as salvation, which allows 'Italianness' to travel through the world, so that it can be enriched and modified by it.<sup>16</sup>

This characterisation of dialect in Ferrante suggests a familiar hierarchy of class-bound, intra-national style in which the 'low' vernacular of childhood, family and provincial shame is overlaid by the 'high' style of the standard, state-sanctioned language. Her work was included in a list of 'thorny internationalists' in 2013, seen then as offering less a 'world lite' product and more a potentially oppositional 'project'.<sup>17</sup> This was on the cusp of her global success, but the suspicion is that she is now on the wrong side of that divide, the sheer visibility and *lisibilité* of the tetralogy, the glossy television adaptation, the Guardian columns, even the sprouting up of tourist walks in 'Ferrante's Naples', since damaging the perception of that thorniness. A critical hostility now lurks around her popularity, both in Italy and abroad, implying a calculated complicity in the transnational market network, imputing an instrumentally middlebrow sensibility in autofictional guise. Such a reading would ascribe the purging of dialect-residue to bland stylistic serviceability. When Ferrante elsewhere describes the richness of *napoletano*, with its layers of Greek, Latin, Arabic, German, Spanish, English and, particularly, French, this sense of dialect-loss is exacerbated.<sup>18</sup>

Walkowitz's figure of 'born-translated' writers suggests that translational collaboration such as Ferrante's can be seen as a new form of pre-emptive agency within the global literary system.<sup>19</sup> However, this has also been conceived in less approving terms. Understanding 'World Literature' to be 'an experiment in national sublation', Emily Apter refers to translational authors whose work is 'shorn of a singular signature'.<sup>20</sup> In this doubled Hegelian sense of abolition and preservation (*Aufheben*), Ferrante's fiction may be seen to sublimate the 'region' (more accurately, a semi-autonomous civic culture), preserving an Italian locality but abolishing its unruly vernacular. Life in the periphery of post-war Naples, socially unreconstructed and ever more historically distant, has a fascinating otherness to a comfortable



middle-class readership. Such readers may recoil from the violence, squalor and sexual politics of the *riione*, while simultaneously relishing the historical framing of the 'primitive'. Overseas success has led Italian critics to wonder why Ferrante's work should have been plucked from the ranks and given an exaggerated importance over other highly-regarded compatriots. One reviewer refers to Ferrante as '*La Grande Assente della letteratura italiana*', cynically implying that her pseudonymity (a grandstanding Absence) has given her the divine protection of critical opinion-formers. Another compares her exportability to the Fellini-esque aspirations of films such as Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza*, a film which invites us to equate *berlusconismo* with Caligulan decadence, but whose ravishing aesthetic spectacle in the end conceals a sentimental narrative.

### Style and form

Such disapproving critical constructions of Ferrante fit Lennon's notion of 'translation-as-process-as-product', which signifies that the product 'fatally' undermines the process, lured by 'the seduction of availability'. Language difference is effaced in the interests of transmission and publication. This is specified by Lennon as a 'formal question of style', the implication being that such monoglot fiction, suppressing linguistic incommensurability in the service of the national standard, and gearing itself towards hegemonic world systems, is intolerant of both avant-garde idiolectal inventiveness and extranational plurilingualism: extremes which come together in the 'untranslatable' (though translated) *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>21</sup> In an age of near-simultaneous translation, the writer's anticipation of a global readership may, according to those such as Tim Parks, lead to the dangerous renunciation of stylistic freedom. Parks names as style the necessary 'friction' between individual and language. What is eliminated is that linguistic friction which, to Parks, accounts for the fact that much world fiction, Always already translating irreducible linguistic particulars, much world fiction eliminates that friction: to Parks, this is stylistically objectionable. And Ferrante is one such writer whose style Parks condemns in the strongest terms, objecting to its abrupt melodramatic announcements and its tossing in of ill-judged similes ('like a white melon that has slipped from your hand' is picked apart).<sup>22</sup> Parks's criticism is not of the translated but of the translatable Italian style. It is revealed that clichés, which may be regarded as home-grown banalities, survive translation.

The most unyielding terms of such arguments have their antecedents in Adorno, who conceives of the culture industry controlling and homogenising the singularity of style so that it becomes a functional style, a feigned style, an obligatory style, a caricature of style.<sup>23</sup> What is often lauded as clear style plays into received opinion, privileging a realm of everyday

speech in which anything alien is excluded. Discourse controlled by the market (or 'coined by commerce') is enforced and perpetuated.<sup>24</sup> This shoddy and excluding familiarity may in the digital age suggest the accelerated transmission of all-too-clearly articulated insights, an exponentially developed wisdom within the echo-chamber, a groupthink style. A rigorous, 'pure' style, dissident and dissonant, will be perceived as obscurantist and will further estrange an audience who do not wish to be discomfited. The contemporary view of a 'bad' translatability is associable with this Adornian suspicion of frictionless communicability. In surrendering the untranslatable remainder of her idiolect, Ferrante is thus at risk of being constructed as sacrificing the friction of both dialect and style.

Ferrante has unsurprisingly addressed the problem of style, her problem of style. She is uncomfortable with the aestheticising of style and form: 'the page may be beautiful but the story is false'; 'the greater the attention to the sentence the more laboriously the story flows'; 'beauty of form, at least in my experience, can become an obsession that hides more complex problems'.<sup>25</sup> The critical sense that she does not 'bother' with style has predictably led to complaints such as Parks's and to the pernicky unearthing of solecisms in Ferrante's writing, which may be put down either to idiosyncratic quirks, to careless urgency (story over style), or to dialectal 'imperfection'.<sup>26</sup> The pleasure of reading for style is reduced to error-spotting or hyper-sensitivity to cliché, manias which can all too easily shade into class-based purism: style is what is left when all the infelicities have been excluded. Ferrante rejects such belletrism, associable with a narcissistic male will-to-style, a squeamishness about cliché, a finicky burnishing and gilding: all forms by which the individual friction of style looks less like a radically resistant form of cultural rebellion and more an exclusionary cult of writerly personality. Ferrante compares writing to butchering eels: a violent and ungentle wielding of the stylist's sharpened point.<sup>27</sup>

Both in Italian and English, the Ferrante sentence sometimes runs on through a paratactic piling-up of comma-spliced clauses, imitative of the narrator's onrush of thoughts, and thus very different from the careful sculpting of the dense periodic sentence, such as in Henry James. She conceives as starting 'from a flat, dry tone, that of a strong, lucid, educated woman', and from a need for a 'terse, clear, unaffected language, without ornamentation'. But she goes on to recognise that the 'expansive sentence [...] has a cold surface and, visible underneath it, a magma of unbearable heat'.<sup>28</sup> In this self-characterisation, there are passages in which control is relinquished and her prose will provide 'something rustier, raspier [...] with a pace that's disjointed and agitated'. The narrator's self-image is upset but then returns to 'a more serene style of narration'.<sup>29</sup> She may reject the beautification of the sentence but she does not quite always deny the name style. Of *The Days of Abandonment*, for example, Ferrante writes that for Olga 'scrivere è resistere e capire' ['writing

is enduring and understanding’], and that ‘[l]a scrittura non ha coloriture magiche e mistiche, al massimo è bisogno di stile’ [‘Writing does not have magical or mystical colourings, at most it’s the need for style’].<sup>30</sup> Style is defined here not as surplus *coloratura* but in terms of *resistenza* – as opposition, resistance, persistence, understanding. ‘Not bothering’ with style, butchering style: there is a sense that Ferrante wishes to approach the *agon* with *dialetto* and *lingua* beyond the gendered literary criteria of stylistic conformity.

Dialect is the repressed language which cannot quite return. Although it is the language of belonging and intimacy, Neapolitan is characterised as hostile, the source of shame, the repository of primary experiences and secrets, a grasping claw, the enemy that will not let go. This is why Ferrante’s narrators let go of *it*. The narrator voices this feeling of insistent subalternity which cannot be shaken off even when she is a *fêted*, translated, middle-aged author who lives in the north. The long-acquired conquest of Italian, not a birthright but the result of hard study, is an omnipresent force of translation. Italian is control and the narrated memory of the acquisition of this control. As a student, Lenù realises she speaks an absurdly bookish Italian, too carefully composed, and often translating dialect words. Such stubborn conscientiousness pays off: she is able to ‘annihilate’ her interlocutor with refined vocabulary, a fail-safe ‘formal orderliness’. Italian is mastered as a rhetorical art but at this point it is Nino, a fellow acquirer, who has Italian *style*, such as in his attack on the Christian Democrat academic who speaks derisively about Lenù’s book. Nino nonchalantly introduces disorder into his polished Italian, showing that he is confident enough to denaturalise the standard, to assert Neapolitan minoration – whereas, under attack from the literary establishment, the young Lenù has once again become the girl with the dialect (*New Name*, 30).

Neapolitan is fragmentation, loss of agency – what Ferrante refers to in her critical writings, using a slightly modified dialect word learnt from her mother but absent in the novels themselves, as *frantumaglia*. That chaos, that threat of *smarginatura* (another coinage but not dialectal: the dissolution of boundaries) is equated with dialect. The novels point to the Vesuvian metaphor that haunts Lila: that historical, linguistic and corporeal identity is liable to be overrun by magmatic forces which will break through the crust of culture, or the epidermis of the disciplined self. Lila’s account of the earthquake is the opportunity for these critical metaphors of *smarginatura* to coalesce in horrible abjection: ‘tutto se ne andava via in grumi sanguigni di mestruo, in polipi sarcomatosi, in pezzi di fibra giallastra’ (*Bambina perduta*, 162) [‘everything would be carried off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber’ (*Lost Child*, 176)]. Yet even in such passages of maximum tension, in which the subject-container is disrupted by excess and motility, we are all the more aware of the lack of dialect, especially as we are told that Lila has been

'kneading in' dialect phrases (*'impastandole'*). Dialect is magma, bodily discontents, disease, and at last it is imagined as erupting. Even so, it continues to be suppressed.

The question, then, is whether this is symptomatic or diagnostic, whether the recurrent *'disse in dialetto'* is consciously recognised as symptom or whether the reader begins to interpret this as an unacknowledged dialect pathology. And here it is important to distinguish between the two Elenas, the fictional writer 'Lenù' and the author 'Elena Ferrante'. As ever, the supervising presence of an author-as-narrator suggests the ludic possibilities of self-reflexive fabulation. Readerly pleasure is not confined to Ferrante's unapologetic borrowing from those immersive, non-highbrow genres, such as the serialised *feuilleton*, saga, soap opera and melodrama, but also lies in the recursive mysteries of metafictional indeterminacy, as Olivia Santovetti has pointed out.<sup>31</sup> The narrative condemns Lila to speaking and writing through Lenù, but Lenù constantly feels that her works are indebted to her brilliant friend, as if she is responsible for them, has already 'written' them. Indeed, in what Merve Emre calls an act of 'symbolic murder', Lenù disposes of Lila's prior ur-text.<sup>32</sup> Those 'phantom' notebooks remain invisible to us. Even in older age Lila is paranoically imagined as a shadow-author, an unpublished rival who is distilling a mature work of brilliance which will finally usurp her friend's entire oeuvre. This fear is what motivates Lenù's late and commercially successful novella, 'A Friendship', written in violation of an agreement not to put Lila's life, particularly the loss of her daughter, on paper.

In the end, then, the metafictional structure of the novels emphasises the formal difference between Elena Ferrante and Elena Greco. Whereas 'A Friendship' almost has the same chronological span as the tetralogy itself, it is implicitly too crystallised or, in Sara Chihaya's terms, too 'formed': it has a 'static precision and taut shapeliness'.<sup>33</sup> Ferrante, on the other hand, has allowed a sprawl of contingency, disjointedness and stylistic carelessness to remain in a temporarily formed state, one which implies its own potential disintegration. The values that Chihaya attributes to Ferrante's unform and unpleasure – the rupture of matter, the flux and the tangle, the disarticulation of the body, the uncanny and the phantasmagoric – are never enjoyed by the form-loving Lenù. Again, when Lenù writes an ambitious social realist novel about Naples, quite different from her first confessional novel, it fails because it does not imitate the contingency and unaesthetic banality of things (*Lost Child*, 311). Form does not communicate the human experience of blurring and formlessness, of *smarginatura*. It may be said that Lenù acknowledges her problem with the traducing of form, and admits to not liking 'A Friendship'. But even so there is an overly-neat symmetry to the series' conclusion: the return of the doll connotes the potential return of Lila, she who has disappeared but cannot be exorcised. She has not burnished the writing, Lenù

tells us, as if reassuring us of her renunciation of a controlling style, but she also asserts that Lila's words are not at all in the completed work (*Lost Child*, 469). There may be no will to style, but there is still, in Chihaya's terms, a self-justifying will to order.

Where does this leave the erasure of dialect? The suppression of dialect fits easily with the narrator's other occlusions. In her assessment of 'queer counterfactual' readings of Ferrante, for example, Jill Richards associates dialect with other dangerous energies – the language of abjection, of obscenity, of scatological discontents.<sup>34</sup> An over-identification with or sexual attachment to Lila would pierce the screen of her heteronormative and Italianised self-protection. Lila and her writings are constructed as unutterable 'dialect' which cannot speak its name. Lenù's dialectal unconscious is queer and must be expelled. The notebooks themselves are an image of secret dialect-style we never see: more frictional, less translatable, less narrativized. The notebooks include isolated dialect and Italian words together, jostling with the gifted autodidact's Latin and Greek translation exercises, texts as *objets trouvés*, small drawings and fragmentary prose poems. Lenù is not throwing away 'pure', essentialised *napoletano*, then: this is the image of an (other) disciplined author's chapbook, an avant-garde admixture of *dialetto* and *lingua* which democratises discursive hierarchy and revels in interlingual misrule. This is the textual threat, including dialect, which Lenù must discard.

Elsewhere, we learn that one draft of Lenù's failed social realist novel had too much dialect; another too little (*Lost Child*, 272-73): again, the author-narrator is exercising control over the matter of dialect. However, for all the differences between the two Elenas, that 'too little' still has an unaccounted and continued metafictional force which cuts into the present narrative. Considering its prominent symbolic force, it is hard to imagine much less dialect than in the Ferrante-authored novels we are reading. We might think that if the raw *frantumaglia* must remain in Ferrante's unformed works, rather than being erased from the crystalline 'A Friendship', so too must the dialect. But the 'unform' of dialect is represented as a *past* stylistic problem of Lenù's, as she taps away on her computer in Turin. It is not part of the linguistic debris of the tetralogy itself. For Lenù's creator, too, dialect has been managed, and thus even in its absence presses against the frames of the self-begetting narrative.

A linguistic aporia remains, despite the differences between the Elenas, but this should be seen as a stylistic problem of Ferrante's linguistic culture as a whole. When Lenù throws Lila's notebooks into the Arno, the Italian reader may recall Alessandro Manzoni's comment that he should rinse in the Arno the rags of the manuscript of *I promessi sposi* (1827) in order to cleanse it of his native Milanese and bestow upon his novel a Florentine literariness. The disposal of Lila's invisible *scritti smarginati* is dramatised as a psychopathological act of revenge but it is at the same time a self-

conscious allusion to the role of dialect in the literature of the unified nation-state. The conspicuousness of Ferrante's allusion to Manzoni points to how questions of dialect and style are not anomalous but inseparable in modern Italian writing. Any suspicion that Ferrante, as well as Lenù, has a dialect pathology must take into account this recent literary history of the Italian language and its dialectal discontents.

### 'Dialet, lenga e stil'

Individual style – idiolect (that is, private language) – is formed out of sociolects, be they of home, family, city or nation. In the context of modern Italian writing, this is most evident in the fast-changing relationship between *dialetto* and *lingua*. In Giovanni Verga's best-known novel *I Malavoglia* (1881), the language of the Sicilian fishing village is captured by a choric voice which, reliant on free indirect discourse, adapts chameleonically to the thoughts and expressions of the characters – what the comparative stylistician Leo Spitzer refers to as systematic filtering.<sup>35</sup> Verga's variant of Sicilian naturalism, *verismo*, has a strict regionalist objectivity which does not rely on external omniscience and avoids paternalistic condescension. Dialect is absent, but the reader has an image or impression of the local Sicilian, rendered through the regular insertion of proverbs, the use of nicknames and the disarranging of syntax. The novel is set in the years immediately after Sicily's incorporation into the newly unified Italy. The patched-up boat of the doomed Malavoglias, aptly named *La Provvidenza*, is at one point compared to the recently conjoined constitutional state itself, and the villagers refer to those tax-collecting others from the north as the Italians. Verga's image of dialect in Italian is different from the literary prose of Manzoni or the mannered style of a contemporary like D'Annunzio, but his naturalism is nevertheless class-determined: an attempt from the upper classes to confect a democratised, pan-Italian vernacular. Only a very small number of Italians – approximately 2.5% of the population – spoke the language at the time of unification in 1861.

In Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) the (Jewish) 'Italian Swabian' author makes self-reflexive play with his anxieties about the wooden Italian, disfigured by *dialettaccio* (ugly Triestine dialect), in which Zeno narrates. Indeed, the 'confessions' are framed on this claim of linguistic inadequacy: 'Con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo! [...] Si capisce come la nostra vita avrebbe tutt'altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto' ('With our every Tuscan word, we lie! [...] Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in dialect').<sup>36</sup> Much of Zeno's comical paranoia about lacking high Florentine style, both cultural and linguistic, is projected on to a sexual rival from Tuscany. For most of his life, Svevo was a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, aware of Italian

style as an exterior state-sanctioned cultural ideal, a kind of linguistic irre-dentism. In *Zeno*, though, he makes a modernist virtue of being a peripheral Italian bourgeois, conscious of not meeting the stylistic requirements of the literary language, exaggerating the psycho-linguistic anxiety of the neurotic, deterritorialised narrator. Svevo's work was originally under-appreciated because it was not literary and prone to provincial solecisms, but has come to be seen as an example of a 'minority' modernism within a major language, sceptical of self-identity and mistrustful of normative style.

Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* (1957) takes a different path of deterritorialisation. Loosely classifiable as an incomplete detective story, an amalgam of dialects and avant-garde word-play, the late modernist novel is a 'messy' *pastiche-pasticcio-pasticciaccio*, in which dialect is inseparable from a novelistic discourse which insists upon the superabundance and autonomy of language. In mid-twentieth-century Italian culture, dialect is at the interface of culture, poetics, aesthetics and politics, most distinctively in the case of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Although Italian was his mother tongue, Pasolini chose to write early poems in *friulano* ('*furlan*'), an elective affiliation which signalled his opposition to the fascist bureaucratisation of Italian. His *furlan* is a fantasy of lost childhood ('*la me zoventùt*'), a quasi-religious veneration of the people and their vernacular. As Barry McCrea has recently pointed out, it is also a utopia of homoerotic desire.<sup>37</sup> This is an invented Friulan rather than a faithfully transcribed peasant language which, as Pasolini puts it in his essay 'Dialect, lenga e stil', is a dialect *and* a style:

Chel stil al è alc di interior, ... a no 'l è né italian e né todesc e né furlan, al è di chel poeta e basta (Style is something inner, ... [it] is not in Italian or German or Friulan, it is that of the poet, and no one else).<sup>38</sup>

Stylistic autonomy is asserted in a collective voice that has been translated out of standard Italian in a process of *ridialettizzazione* or 'redialectising'.<sup>39</sup> The ideal of absolute style, individuated or communal, can never escape the matter of stylistic choice: in this case, style is declared to be 'né italian ... né furlan' – in Friulan.

Although Pasolini's attachment to dialect is ideologically motivated by a resistance to linguistic conformity, by the 1950s he was writing essays about the '*confusione degli stili*' which sought to resist not only the fascist *lingua dei padroni* and 'high' literary Italian, but also the inter-regional, normalised *koiné* regarded as expedient by the Italian Communists. His fictional representations of the sub-proletariat of the Roman *periferia*, such as *Ragazzi di vita* (1954), do not translate dialectal dialogue for the reader, though it should be said that Roman is nearer to Italian than other dialects and thus more generally comprehensible. Nevertheless, dialect words are not isolated as exotic objects of ethno-linguistic curiosity, as can be found even in such a

sympathetic and antifascist contemporary work as Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945). Pasolini's Roman novels aim to de-provincialise dialect, allowing the subaltern language to speak for itself. However, his later statements are fatalistic: 'Oggi il dialetto è un mezzo per opporsi all'acculturazione. Sarà, come sempre, una battaglia perduta' ['Today, dialect provides a means to oppose acculturation. As ever, it will be a lost battle'].<sup>40</sup> Dialect was meant to be the invigorating counterforce to bourgeois commodification but even the *ragazzi* were now watching RAI, as the standard Italian of the mass media spread with extraordinary rapidity. The centre-pieces of neo-realism, which Rossellini regarded as the entry of 'dialect' into Italian cinema, prioritised the translatability of dialect within the imagined language community. Pasolini's invoking of a perennial lost battle points to recurrent dialect-defeat. Writers like Pasolini, according to McCrea, are not finally engaged in an instrumentalised attempt to resuscitate a minority language but instead retreat into a fantasy which projects a ghostly afterlife on to dialect.<sup>41</sup>

### Middlebrow style

Seen in these broader contexts, Ferrante's language anxiety cannot be divorced from rapid sociolinguistic transformation in the post-war nation state. Indeed, the Neapolitan novels emerge, amongst other things, as a quasi-documentary record of how language acquisition and language difference were experienced in mid-to-late twentieth-century Italy: how the condition of diglossia, which enabled a pragmatic code-switching between dialect and language but also led to one language taking refuge or doing battle with the other, went from being exceptional to typical. Reading Ferrante's work in the light of writers like Verga, Svevo and Pasolini may reveal this typicality, but it also emphasises the limitations of posing this problem in relation to a male literary tradition.

The response to Ferrante's supposed stylistic shortcomings is associable with the critical suspicion of the middlebrow, usually though not exclusively associated with an immersive, feminised style of reading. As Diana Holmes points out, women are the statistically dominant group of novel readers, the '*gros lecteurs*', yet male canon-formers impute characteristics to the middlebrow which have petrified into caricatures: it is intellectually naive, lacking in analytical rigour and ironic detachment; it is formally conventional, domesticated and sentimental, unconcerned with questions of overarching societal, economic and political importance; it is credulous about commercial manipulation within the culture industry; it provides an all-too-easily won affirmative view of life out of keeping with the spartan privations which can characterise the exegesis of modernist texts.<sup>42</sup> Ferrante, too, refers to the great male writers who belittle their female colleagues or attribute to



them the writing of ‘banal, trifling stories – of marriage, children, love affairs’: even good women authors are to stay on the ‘balcony’, observing the playing out of intellectual history and serious revolutionary art. She is well aware of the middlebrow stigma: ‘The cliché dies hard: we are emotional, we please’.<sup>43</sup> Her work is resistant to such stereotyping of gender and genre, and illustrates Holmes’s defence of middlebrow affect, in which the voluntary and self-aware suspension of disbelief encourages cognitive complexity.

Ferrante’s work confounds some of the received criteria of taste bracketed with the ‘brows’. The violence, vulgarity, desperation and venality of the narrator’s upbringing distance the novels from accusations of petty bourgeois gentility. The lowness of the *rione* – in a rare dialect word that significantly does appear, its *lota* (filth) – is written about rather than euphemistically evaded. Here is the abject, cruel, primitive, transgressive, illiterate: the scorned discontents of Italian culture. This setting provides violent material for pulp fiction (the neo-gothic basement chambers of bogeyman Don Achille’s apartment block, blood spurting from his carotid artery or to the copper pot, Lila being thrown out of the window by her father), or for a grimly determinist naturalist crime novel (the contaminating underworld of the Camorra, murder in a meat-processing factory). As Santovetti and others have shown, the formulas of the nineteenth-century melodrama and the tricks of the *feuilleton* magazine unapologetically mix with the shock tactics of the serialised novel, photo-romances and the excesses of the daytime television soap.<sup>44</sup> The flaunting of these boilerplate genre traits corresponds to Ferrante’s suspicion of ‘cultured’ high style. There is a lack of bourgeois restraint or aspiration. It is true that Lenù calculates her ascent through the social hierarchy of arty-liberal families, from the Galianis to the Airotas. Once achieved, though, that ascent is rejected on the grounds that such intellectual self-fashioning is gendered: she had sought a male intelligence and felt she had been ‘inventata dai maschi, colonizzata dalla loro immaginazione’ (*Bambina perduta*, 47) [‘invented by men, colonised by their imagination’, *Lost Child*, 56]. She comes to know the meaning of *mascolinizzare la propria testa* (*Chi fugge*, 255) – of making her own head masculine so that it is acceptable to male culture.

Masculine style must be unmade, unformed. Dayna Tortorici has referred to Ferrante’s invaluable gift in writing ‘books that speak to [female] intellectuals in a language their mothers can understand’.<sup>45</sup> If the books are to be understood by the mother, symbolic or generational, that aspiration must include Lenù’s semi-literate, long despised ‘real’ mother of the Neapolitan novels, as well her hyper-educated Italo-American daughters. Style is purged of dialect, belletrism, academic obfuscation, and directed towards a largely though not exclusively female readership of any class, generation, nationality or ‘brow’. Reproaching the universalising feminist *koiné* as

stylistically colourless underestimates the resistance of the masculinist colonisation of canonical style. Ferrante has mentioned the importance of Luisa Muraro's Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in the 1970s, which assembled writers as diverse as Charlotte Brontë, Anna Kavan and Ingeborg Bachmann, and which acted as a gathering-point for the *Rivoltella Femminile*, a branch of Italian feminism which felt that the Irigarayan notion of sisterhood had underplayed the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. Implicitly, then, and alongside fellow southern Italian writers like Elsa Morante and Anna Maria Ortese, Ferrante makes a bid to join this new transnational body of feminist writers, 'the mothers of us all'. To do so risks the mocking Lila of the narrowing eyes, to whom Carla Lonzi's *Let's Spit on Hegel* may appear as another form of intellectual parrot-chatter. Such opposition does not suggest that aspirational pan-feminist style will be frictionless.

Ferrante's style may come off worse in comparison with other women writers. Silvia Caserta has made the point that Ferrante's and Natalia Ginzburg's styles are similarly translatable, but whereas Ginzburg's style is praised as limpid, even associable with modernist impersonality, Ferrante's has been construed as careless.<sup>46</sup> The implication is that Ferrante lacks Ginzburg's stylish reticence and narrative economy. At the beginning and end of Ginzburg's *Le voci della sera* (*Voices in the Evening* (1961)), for example, the daughter is reduced to the role of a non-speaking interlocutor, as if the phenomenal and symbolic mother over-writes the daughter. The silence of the narrator is read as a strategic textual effect – a characteristically 'opaque observational core', in Rachel Cusk's words.<sup>47</sup> In Ginzburg's *Lessico familiare* (*Family Lexicon* (1963)), this stylistic question bears directly on dialect. The novel begins with the language of the father, a Jewish Triestine doctor whose family has moved to Turin, and who repeatedly uses non-standard words to berate the social awkwardness, slobbishness, foolishness or ignorance of others. His educated Italian is punctuated with Triestine dialect words (*sbrodeghezzi*, *sempi*) and with terms (*negri*, *negrigura*) which can be more broadly classed as *italiano-giudeo*, a Jewish Northern Italian dialect with roots in the Venice Ghetto.<sup>48</sup> The family 'lexicon' is an intercultural mix of these *tormentoni* – recurring, maddening family words – and are examples of dialect *as* idiolect. The lexicon of the father bears the historically racist attitudes of the community for which it speaks, and Ginzburg allows those racist terms to stand as sociolinguistic markers. Her reticence implies that they also stand for the minority community of Jewish Italians who are living in an interwar fascist state that is attempting to 'purify' language of foreign antibodies. The narrator's opening reflections on non-normative dialect, even its residual *negrigura*, are to be seen in the light of this sinister standardisation.

In contrast to Ginzburg, the middlebrow readability of Ferrante's style is produced from an overtly effortful extrication from the dialectal lexicon of her family. For all its quirks and disfigurements, the family style inherited by Ginzburg is one which implies her movement towards an Italian whose unfussy clarity stands against the fascistic distortions of language, together with the pedantry of the gatekeepers of fine Italian, the *Accademia della Crusca*. Ferrante's family lexicon is less directly affected by such linguistic directives from above and more dialectally-bound to its self-contained Neapolitan culture. For Ferrante, the parental acquisition of spoken, never mind written, Italian is narrated as a struggle, signalling how class difference, increasingly manifest in the incompatibility of *lingua* and *dialetto*, divides the family.

## Conclusion

The question of Ferrante's unappreciated Italian, and of her lack of either high literary style or counter-interpellative insubordination, cannot be separated from the recent socio-cultural formation of a national language out of its Italic dialects. Ferrante's problem with style is hardly unique to her, given the extraordinary rapidity with which the dialect battle was lost and (Tuscan) Italian taken up as the cisalpine vernacular of the peninsula. Within a single post-war generation, a largely literary language was adopted by many millions as the vernacular of the hearth, at the very time Ferrante's characters were learning it as a second language. Only over this historical span can we understand, for example, how the radicalised construction worker Pasquale, a dyed-in-the-wool dialect speaker, one who had provocatively brought Naples to Florence by speaking only dialect in the arty bourgeois house of the Airotas, comes out of jail still an unrepentant Marxist, but also an old man who now speaks to Lenù in Italian (*Lost Child*, 470). The novelist Ferrante hardly smooths over this transformational history, in which the speaking of Italian is naturalised, but rather narrates and contains it.

The author-narrator's growth into style looks less like a psychopathological *agon*, the repression of a dialectal unconscious, and more like a clear-eyed and imperative documenting of how sociolinguistic history acts upon the national subject. Always beadily attentive throughout to the regular marking of her diglossic characters' code-switching, Ferrante chooses to present dialect off-stage, ob-scene, consciously increasing that conclusive feature of *latency* identified by de Rogatis. 'Sprinkling' Neapolitan would be retrogressive: better let it threaten to burst out very rarely at moments of magmatic pressure, but never to be an object of cool ethnographic curiosity. And Italian, the instrumental *lingua*, is also marked as a second-order, language: '*disse in italiano*' mirrors '*disse in dialetto*'. That 'Italian', though,

is plural, existing in registers which are imitated, conquered, manipulated and, in the case of 'good' Italian – of beautiful, orotund sentences, of fine style – cast off.

This amounts to the evaluation of a near-silence, and thus of making an ideological distinction, in Pierre Macherey's terms, between what Ferrante's language, her *lingua*, does not say, what it refuses to say, and what it cannot say. That final category is, in Gayatri Spivak's reading of Macherey, one which the 'heliocentric' western intellectual construction of the episteme is unable to constitute. Spivak's original example is of the muted Bengali *sati*, the widow who is constructed as willingly immolating herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre: that sexed subaltern consciousness is impossible to retrieve because of the gross mistranslations of the imperialistic archive – of the 'epistemic violence' that has been done to it.<sup>49</sup> Ferrante's characters are white, western Europeans: her silences do not represent the lost origins of unspeakable subalternity. Nevertheless, she writes working-class girls and women of the *periferia* who are constantly subject to sexual taunts and violence, and belong to a group racially abused as *terrone*, southern Italian. These 'semi-colonial' determinations, together with the generic middlebrow between-ness, suggest the spectrum of dialects and languages, too. *Napoletano* has an autonomous cultural history unlike Pasolini's confection of peasant *furlan*, but is more distant from the national language than his *romanesco*. And Italian itself is in an intermediate position within the global literary system. The translatability of Ferrante's Italian should not be precisely equated to that of the serviceable English standard of the 'dull' global novel. Italian, endowed with the rich literary traditions of the Renaissance, cannot be 'minor' but neither does it have the global status of French or English, each a *lingua franca* – respectively of Goethean *Weltliteratur* and contemporary world literature.<sup>50</sup>

A hermeneutically suspicious reading would limit the stylistic occlusion of dialect in Ferrante to a stigmatic sense of what the text does not say but could have said: to its lack of semi-colonialist abrogation, to the absence of dialect 'writing back'. But I am uneasy with dismissing this as a tactical capitulation to corporatised, 'world lite' universalism. It cannot be explained away as provincial symptom, either. I prefer to think of a more active *refusal* in Ferrante to utter a collective linguistic consciousness. In other contexts, such as in Irish writing, the agency of such refusal is easily accepted: in *Ulysses*, for example, the Irish spoken by the Englishman and understood as French by the milkwoman is purposely silenced, not written on the page. Brian Friel's *Translations* depends on this refusal. The mysterious near-banishment of dialect resides in the aporetic 'I' (Lenù), a subject who has constituted herself and an object who has been formed, dialogically 'me' and 'other'.<sup>51</sup> Dialect is uncannily close to the hearth and its prohibition is conspicuous, given that the novels advertise the Vesuvian character of dialect

and narrate the memory of diglossic encounters so insistently. The *post hoc* erasure of linguistic difference is finally felt as estranging, amounting to a refusal to question style and dialect in the present. A dominant language has been assimilated and subjectivised, and a minor language suppressed while still being ‘worked through’ – that much is surely evident. That self-reflexive gap between Elena Ferrante and Elena Greco is not closed, and the problem of dialect is not played back into the enunciating voice or reinscribed into a processual style. The *questione linguistica* is repeatedly confronted in narrative but it is evaded in language. Under such conditions, Ferrante’s middlebrow style marks both the constraints and possibilities of a utopian pan-feminist translatability in the ‘world lit’ economy.

## Notes

1. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 263.
2. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
3. Brian Lennon, *In Babel’s Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 10.
4. See, for example, Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s-1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women’s Reading and the Literary Canon in France Since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).
5. The phrase ‘delinquent dialect’ is used by Seamus Deane in his ‘Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea’, in *Ireland’s Field Day*, ed. Roger McHugh (Derry: Field Day Theatre Co., 1985), p. 47.
6. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, ‘Three Accounts of Literary Style’, in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 16 (2016), pp. 151-71.
7. Joanna Biggs, ‘I was blind, she a falcon’, *London Review of Books*, 37.17 (10 September 2015). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n17/joanna-biggs/i-was-blind-she-a-falcon>. [Date accessed: 28 March 2021].
8. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 315.
9. All references to the following Neapolitan novels will be made in the text: Elena Ferrante, *L’amica geniale* (Roma: Edizioni e/o, 2011); *My Brilliant Friend* (New York: Europa, 2012); *Storia del nuovo cognome* (Roma: Edizioni e/o, 2012); *The Story of a New Name* (New York: Europa, 2013); *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (Roma: Edizioni e/o, 2013); *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (New York: Europa, 2014); *Storia della bambina perduta* (Roma: Edizioni e/o, 2014); *The Story of the Lost Child* (New York: Europa, 2015).
10. Very occasionally, an expression may be italicised: *uommen’e mmerd*, for ‘shit men’ (*Nuove cognome*, 33); *lota* for ‘filth’ (*Bambina perduta*, 57); *’sta cessa ...*, *’sta loffa.. mappina* (*Chi fugge*, 372) [for piece of garbage, stinking nonentity [...] nothing’ (*Those Who Leave*, 407)]. The Neapolitan term *cesso* is used for bathroom, instead of the standard *bagno*. It is significant that terms relating to filth, refuse and bodily waste irrupt into the Italian,

suggesting the narrator's association of the dialect with abjection and cultural discontents. In extremis, Lila's brother Rino lapses into Neapolitan, although such phrases – 'ca chillu strunz' or 'tammaro' (*L'amica geniale*, 190) – are still blended into longer speeches largely represented in Italian. Dialect also appears as such sexual slurs: *ricchione* (or fairy: *Nuovo cognome*, 358) and *zoccola* (or whore: *Chi fugge*, 89). Importantly, too, the native reader of Italian might recognise standard though colloquial Italian phrases which originate in *napoletano*.

11. See Ann Goldstein, Interview on Leonard Lapote show (WNYC, 21 April 2016), [www.wync.org](http://www.wync.org) [Date accessed: 16 June 2020].
12. Antoine Berman, 'Translation and the Trials of the Foreign', trans. and ed. Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 250.
13. One of the most commonly cited critiques is that of Stefano Jossa, 'Non si deve studiare la Ferrante all'Università', *Doppiozero*, 20 May 2017.
14. Tiziana de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante's Key Words* (London: Europa, 2019), p. 170.
15. De Rogatis, p. 171.
16. Elena Ferrante, *Incidental Inventions* (London: Europa, 2019), pp. 23-4.
17. 'World Lite: What is Global Literature?', in *n+1*, 17 (2013). <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/> [Date accessed: 30 March 2021].
18. Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa, 2016), pp. 195-8. When reading *Madame Bovary* in French as a student, the French could be voiced in *napoletano*: Emma's *laisse-moi* to her daughter Berthe is like her mother's *læssame*; Charles's sticking-plaster, *le sparadap*, is like 'o *sparatràp*. In this earlier setting, standard Italian would have got in the way of the relationship between Neapolitan and French. This emphasises the many shades of Romance languages from Portugal to Italy and how there are no purely linguistic criteria for distinguishing a language from a dialect.
19. See Elisa Segnini, 'Andrea Camilleri's Montalbano and Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale*: the Afterlife of two "Glocal" Series', *Translator* (August 2018), p. 23.
20. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 15.
21. Lennon, *In Babel's Shadow*, pp. 10-12.
22. Tim Parks, 'How Could You Like That Book?', *New York Review of Books*, 2015. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/11/10/how-could-you-like-that-book/> [Date accessed: 28 March 2021].
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- elena-ferrantes-writing-is-better-in-english-than-italian/ [Date accessed: 5 May 2020]. Francesco Longo, for example, distinguishes between Ferrante as narrator and writer, the latter being associated with style. Ferrante's mode is said to be epic and styleless: 'Tutto procede in modo epico, ma *senza stile*. E la letteratura, si sa, è solo *questione di stile*' (italics mine), 'Il fenomeno Elena Ferrante visto dai critici', Luca Ricci, *Il Messaggero* (Thursday 19 March 2015), [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/spettacoli/libri/elena\\_ferrante\\_opinione\\_critici-930631.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/spettacoli/libri/elena_ferrante_opinione_critici-930631.html) [Date accessed: 20 May 2020].
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  41. McCrea compares Pasolini's work to the poetic blossoming of dialect writing in writers like Seán Ó Riordáin.
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### **Disclosure statement**

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