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Elena Ferrante as the Classics

Executions of the author have been the guilty pleasure of many a court critic since King Barthes' *The Death of the Author* first gestured to the guillotine.¹ Much rarer is for an author to take the advice to heart and do the job themselves. And especially rare, we might add, in the 50 years after Barthes unleashed his heady 1968 manifesto: a period of steroid-bloated boom and bust that has taken little notice of some French guy's academic declaration, and continued to press ahead with developments in the book trade, squeezing the author to become ever more present, but present only as a necessary salesperson recruited to market her signed-off/over commodity.

Genette, some other French guy perhaps now as important to classical studies as Barthes (was?),² split his concept of the paratext in two: the peritext, that is the physical framing devices around the text, such as title, contents page and preface, and the epitext, the sum of other material 'about the book' floating around the culture-sphere, such as author interviews, book launches, talks, criticism, reviews, commentary and gossip.³ We could say that the author of a contemporary book is one of the prime generators of epitext, the accompanying metadata tailored to

1 Barthes 1968; followed up by Foucault 1969 (both collected in Burke 1995). Richer theoretical treatments of the author have appeared since: see articles in Burke 1995 and Bennett 2005.

2 His work in general powers many classicists with narratological bents (e.g., de Jong 2014). His work on the paratext in particular is fast becoming absorbed into the classical bloodstream (see e.g., Jansen 2014).

3 Genette 1997, 5.

thrust the book into consumer hands. These books need their authors to survive, if survival means consumption. Or at least, that's how the common wisdom of the publishing world would have it.

'I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors.' How strangely, then, this kind of sentence must have rung in the publisher's, not to mention the public's, increasingly author-centric ears, upon its first written utterance in 1991. This brave statement can be attributed to Elena Ferrante,⁴ whose corpus has become one of the most famous and critically acclaimed of all contemporary fiction writers. I say 'attributed' not because I doubt she wrote it, but because, as we shall see, no other author in recent history has done so much to complicate and upend our deep-set notions of authorship and ownership, and to help us understand all the swirling complications of what it means 'to write'. I shall argue that, in displacing the author from her pedestal as guarantor of meaning, indeed retiring her (almost) altogether, Elena Ferrante is performing a kind of neoclassicising experiment. This is a remarkable long-term project of classical reception that is not just a slow and steady engagement with the Classics (it is that too), but an attempt to approximate a state of the classic; that is, to 'become classical'.

Before we dig in, let me explain that claim a little more responsibly. Ferrante is the author of several novels. And that is probably her preferred laconic self-description.⁵ All of these novels brilliantly plumb the depths of a first-person female psychology, exploring themes of abandonment, fractured identity, the mother-daughter relationship and writing as personal truth, among countless other things. She has been writing consistently and publishing sporadically for twenty-five years; but she exploded into bestseller fame in the Anglophone world only a few years ago, on publication of Ann Goldstein's English translation of her *Neapolitan Quartet*.⁶ Despite inspiring a heady devotion among critics and fans (and most critics moonlight as fans), her reception in the public domain has been

4 Ferrante 2016, 15 (originally in letter dated September 21, 1991).

5 See below on her sparing paratextual biography (Ferrante 2016, 389).

6 Ferrante 2012 to 2015.

tarnished by fixation on Ferrante's choice to opt out of said domain: the author 'chose absence'.⁷ That is, she has employed the pseudonym 'Elena Ferrante' her whole career, withheld her historical/legal/biographical person, and only entered into the world beyond her writing by giving the occasional written interview (i.e., more writing). (I am choosing to unsee Claudio Gatti's 'revelation' of Ferrante's supposed real identity in October 2016. Since the initial media storm, we are no closer to establishing whether this is true or not; and even if it were, it is an ethical as well as a literary obligation to respect Ferrante's chosen privacy as best we can).⁸ So the author Elena Ferrante is an entirely written creation; we Classicists might call it a *persona*, though the pedestrian, toy-town tenor of that wooden term is completely inadequate for capture the radical literary project headed by Ferrante. The written crafting of a *persona qua author* may have been par for the course in the ancient world (cf. Virgil below); what makes Ferrante special (among other things) is her untimely devotion to such an exercise in the here and now, when the exigencies of the book trade (as above) require the real author to rock up at all times. The major text in which Ferrante retrospectively creates 'the work of herself' is *Frantumaglia*: a recently released collection of interviews and correspondence spanning her entire publishing career, and the main focus of this essay.⁹ This volume reveals a remarkable consistency in the author's resolve to remove her historical/biographical self from her writing, and by doing so, to exist solely in and as that writing. As epitext, *Frantumaglia* is unique insofar as it is pure words on a page (no real identity revealed; no author interviews in person; no book launches; no literary festival pep talks). In Genette's terms, Ferrante's great twist is to divert and convert all epitext into peritext, or even 'the text'; to make herself and her work one unified literary system. Ferrante *is* her writing.

7 Ferrante 2016, 255 (originally appeared as *New York Times* article, 9 December 2014).

8 The literary world was rocked by the revelation of Ferrante's 'real-life' identity. Journalist Claudio Gatti (2016) combed through the publisher's financial records and traced substantial payments to Anita Raja, a Rome-based translator (and who, along with her novelist husband Domenico Starnone, had already been a prime 'suspect'). The jury is still out on these revelations (Raja has not yet responded to them), but this article will try to honour Ferrante's written wishes by having precious little to do with the legal person behind Ferrante's name.

9 This version significantly updates and expands a previous Italian edition of the same name (Ferrante 2003).

While this grafting of writing and absence is also perfectly compatible with a poststructuralist ethics and reader-response hermeneutics (both of which Ferrante has nodded to at times),¹⁰ I have my suspicions that there is something altogether more classical about Ferrante's defiant act of suicide. For the lack of authorial epitext to scaffold interpretation of a text is precisely the liberating condition we often land in when tackling the remnant words of antiquity;¹¹ indeed, that condition perhaps accounts partly for why poststructuralism and reader-response were so wholeheartedly embraced by Classics at the turn of the millennium.¹² To read a classical text, or to read a text classically, is often to be confronted with a particularly weighty quantity of autonomy reserved for text and reader; the bodily author, and its written first person, often disappears from the equation. My contention in this essay is that Ferrante is consciously trying to replicate the energy of that encounter in readers of her own text. By setting classical parameters for the consumption of her work, she is creating her own version of what reading 'the Classics' is all about: an interaction between us and a magical object, the source of which, beyond the writing, no one really knows.¹³

This article will mainly concern itself with a wider, deeper and more diffuse form of classical reception than can be tracked via individual moments of intertextuality, or sustained parallel structures, or comparable forms, or extensive

10 Ferrante invokes Barthes' *S/Z* at 2016, 383; her commentary is peppered with deference to the reader; e.g., at 383 again: 'Maybe we should always assume that what the author imagines he has written is no more or less valid than what the reader imagines he has read'. Cf. 46, 180, 190–3, 197, 274, 361.

11 There are obviously countless exceptions: Cicero, for example, boasts a vast pool of epitext in which to swim (if we treat the *Letters* as a kind of epitext). But this is still a drop in the ocean compared to the flood of author promotions around contemporary books. Ferrante's preference for sticking true to the *epistolary* form (letters to the publisher or emails with interviewers) is perhaps another way of bidding for the classical.

12 The Martindale (1993, 3) mantra 'meaning is always realised at the point of reception' continues to shape criticism in Classics.

13 This is, of course, a tendentious vision of the corpus of classical literature: this article's reviewer rightly points out that Latin literature, for example, is crowded with fame-hungry, self-obsessed megalomaniacs. True! But every act of reception is a reinvention of tradition; and I would say that Ferrante is particularly drawn to the most 'impersonal' texts in *her* classical tradition (Homer, Plato, Virgil; but also the 'transpersonality' of classical myth).

imitation. Ferrante (in character as self-created author/persona, and henceforth my use of the name should always be understood thus) is studiously vague when asked about the concrete literary substrate of her work, and what texts have influenced her where;¹⁴ her theory on how literary connections play out on the ground is refreshingly honest in that it allows for a generous degree of unconscious filtration and recombination in the authorial mind, to such an extent that what comes out on the page may only seem tangentially related to previous words, even if those words have been instrumental in forming that page. For Ferrante, intertextuality (or reception, if we can analogise temporarily and illicitly) is a kind of unconscious psychological process, which privileges covert and untraceable links (for example, individual words or isolated passages sparking unpredictable leaps in the author's mind) over the names and texts the author explicitly invokes as 'influences'.¹⁵ You can almost feel Ferrante's words squirm in discomfort when interviewers force her to name drop, and she is baldly honest (not to mention right on) about how we cannot really trust an author's roll-call of her own literary genealogy, which usually gives a history of a curated family, rather than the more complex real one into which she was born.¹⁶ She openly admits herself a forgetful and distorting reader.¹⁷ And my very automatic reflex to reach for the word 'admit' here is part of the problem: some still think that reading can and should be something other than distorting and forgetful. Ferrante's vision of literary affiliation, then—like all of the written 'epitext' she has churned out at publisher's behest—is designed to be partial and nebulous, and to leave a roomy opening for her readers to occupy; so let's do her a service, and take her up on it.

14 See for example, Ferrante 2016, 122, 303. She is even dramatically hesitant about staging specific connections with her supposed major model, Elsa Morante (Ferrante 2016, 63).

15 Ferrante 2016, 192–3.

16 Ferrante 2016, 303: 'Writers often give themselves grand literary forebears whose echo in their works is in fact tenuous. So it's better not to name famous names—they indicate only the degree of our pride'.

17 Ferrante 2016, 62.

Elena Ferrante and the Classics

Before we discuss Ferrante's project as a twist on classical authorship, it might be a good idea to roll out some evidence for her conversance with classical material. One of the few autobiographical insights Ferrante has leaked (and all of those insights are purpose-built to have some transparent bearing on her writing, to bring out the truth in her text) is that she read and translated Latin and Greek extensively at an Italian *liceo classico*, and went on to study classical philology at university. But—again, as with all her lovingly manicured factoids—this tells us nothing much more than what we could have gleaned from reading her work. That is itself a very classical operation of inferring the life from the work (see below); suffice to say here that Ferrante's riff on this tradition is to plant the seeds herself, rather than let the factoids be produced by the creative over-interpretation of prurient biographical critics.

Ferrante's corpus is littered with classical names and archetypes. Her very name is perhaps a reclaiming of Helen, the most maligned woman of the classical tradition, a name also attached to other major characters (*The Lost Daughter*, *The Neapolitan Quartet*), and deployed alongside other classical nomenclature, such as Leda (*The Lost Daughter*).¹⁸ She has been attracted throughout her corpus to the figure of Dido and the story of Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.¹⁹ Dido often functions as the paradigm of the abandoned woman, who is at the same time a rock-bottom of self-destructive overindulgence; a figure plaguing the women of her novels as an eternal archetype which her incredibly determined and self-disciplined women have to battle not to become (usually succeeding).²⁰ Dido's presence culminates in the *Neapolitan Quartet*, where the protagonist and narrator Elena Greco ('Helen

18 See Bady 2015; cf. Ferrante 2016, 206, 218.

19 For an extended study of Dido in Ferrante, see Bellei 2016, McCarter 2016. See also Scurr 2016.

20 See Tortorici 2015: 'Becoming the *poverella* doesn't mean breaking like a knick-knack in the hands of a man, as Olga once thought—it means seeking triumph in spectacular self-destruction, like Dido on the pyre. To resist the *poverella* is not to resist her fate, but to pass through it like a crucible: become the *poverella*, then become Olga again. A person with a name, not a martyr'. Cf. Ferrante 2016, 83.

the Greek’) writes her undergraduate thesis on Dido and Book 4 (of the *Aeneid*) at the very same time as she writes her first successful novella confronting the demons of her own abuse by the self-important Aeneas-esque lothario, Donato Sarratore (an abuse that is also a kind of sexual awakening for Elena; she struggles herself to unpack her own agency and desire surrounding this episode).²¹ Elena Greco’s boyfriend while at Pisa (and future husband), Pietro Airota, is simultaneously writing his own thesis on the cult of Bacchus—perhaps also somehow related given the familiar presence of Bacchic motifs in *Aeneid* 4 (Dido as Maenad/Aeneas as Bacchus etc.),²² although the content of both these undergraduate works is left hanging. What this nexus of simultaneity does do, however, is set up the prospect of a complex traffic between the worlds of academic classics and creative writing within the novel, via their intersection in Elena Greco, from which it is perhaps all too tempting to leap to the possibility that Ferrante could be making a similar point about the production of her own work. In any case, I’d claim this as a refreshing memo for classical scholarship: that ideas do not respect the fortifications of an ivory tower, and that everything we write as scholars is infected with our private and reading lives beyond the academy.

Apart from this—what classicists might call ‘internal evidence’—we also have some ‘external’; although Ferrante’s project of full written mediation, and her refusal to dog her creations with anything so cheapening as an authorial presence, means that the internal/external dichotomy we are so addicted to deploying in Classics practically breaks down. In *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante invokes many classical authors and myths. Her counter-text is certainly Virgil;²³ her corpus could almost be understood as one lengthy feminist²⁴ riposte to the victimised

21 Donato Sarratore and his mistress Melina are compared to Aeneas and Dido at Ferrante 2012, 221.

22 See for example, Fernandelli 2002, Krummen 2004, Weber 2002, Giusti 2016.

23 See Bady 2015.

24 Ferrante herself is cautious with the term: though she has explicitly flagged an affinity with difference feminism (on which see Tortorici 2015), she views excessive personal and political conviction as obstructive to storytelling (Ferrante 2016, 87–8). Cf. 2016, 332: ‘In short, I am a passionate reader of feminist thought. Yet I do not consider myself a militant; I believe I am incapable of militancy’. Again, note her self-characterisation as *reader* first and foremost.

Dido of *Aeneid* 4, a kind of repudiation of the Abandoned Woman figure in which the abandoned women regain themselves through writing. But Ferrante claims that she is also drawn to Ovid;²⁵ his world of fluid identities certainly prefigures the *smarginatura* (usually rendered in English as ‘dissolving of boundaries’), which makes Lila (the co-protagonist of the Neapolitan Quartet) tick. There are also certain classical myths to which Ferrante resorts in explanation; for example, Leda,²⁶ Ariadne²⁷ and Asclepius.²⁸ In the first case, her knowledge even seems to tap into obscure byways and variants of the myth.²⁹ That’s all to say that Ferrante is deeply steeped in the Classics; and specifically, she is an old hand *reader* of the Classics. It is this experience as a reader which, I conjecture, helped her form her vision for how literature should work; namely, an ideal relation between reader and text which cuts out the author as much as possible, and lets her back in, if at all, reincarnated as a life worth living solely in and as text.

Now that the sceptic has her credentials in certified writing (well, if you trust this dodgy doc’s signature), the rest of this article will set about showing how Ferrante both absorbs and warps several strands of classical authorship, as well as traditions of thought woven from those strands. These wrap around three titanic author figures of antiquity: Homer, Plato and Virgil. We shall see how Ferrante plots her own effaced authorship using models found in and around these three lodestones of western culture³⁰—who at the same time happen to be our ancient authors at

25 Ferrante 2016, 373. Ferrante even flirts with updating Ovid’s *Heroides* when she talks of her abandoned project of writing fictional letters to a modern Ariadne (2016, 146).

26 Ferrante 2016, 206.

27 Ferrante 2016, 144–5.

28 Ferrante 2016, 190–1.

29 Ferrante 2016, 206.

30 I am mindful here of the politics of this critical move, which may well be open to the charge of writing out Ferrante’s clear feminist lineage (about which many good things have already been written: see for example, Tortorici 2015, Scurr 2016) in favour of a patronising/patriarchal redomestication: ‘look how good this female author is, (because) she works with the big daddies of the tradition!’ While I acknowledge that objection, I still maintain that this kind of exercise is absolutely necessary to the project of incorporating more women writers into a (mobile, flexible) canon. Women writers are too often subject to the even more patronising critical manoeuvre of being lumped *only* with other women; this article is a small attempt to show that Ferrante stacks up against the men of the past too.

their most muted, retiring and inaccessible.³¹ These authors, like all dead ones of course, have survived only in their writing; but these three do so with a particular exclusiveness and intensity, precisely because the sense of an external, living author is kept so religiously from their texts. Ferrante basks in their shades.

The Homeric author: Elena

We need not probe too deep for signs that Ferrante's engagement with absence is also a channelling of Homer, the originary absent author. The very name Elena, as mentioned above, is partly an attempt to break the *Iliad's* eponymous character out of her Homeric prison; or a repossessing of the name which has itself been subject to multiple male repossessions.³² In addition, the debates over Ferrante's authorial identity (is she one? Is she two? Is she many?)³³ raise the spectre of the old impasse within Homeric scholarship between Unitarians and Separatists;³⁴ if Ferrante lays claim to a Homeric name, she is rewarded with a ride on the same kind of scholarly merry-go-round usually reserved for Homer. Her authorial absence, that is, generates the same style of speculative and attributive reading practice as Homer's has done for a long time; so even if she did not want to make a Homer of herself, scholars would have done the job for her. One article was not called 'The Elenic Question' for nothing.³⁵

31 A nice source on the Greek side is Dio Chrysostom *Oration 55*: the speaker sets up Homer and Socrates (not quite Plato) as paradigms of modesty in not talking about themselves: Homer doesn't write his name or give any autobiographical information; Socrates' words are preserved by others.

32 On the importance of naming in feminist self-creation, see Hauser 2016a, 133.

33 Ferrante's response to a question about critics attributing her work to different hands is measured and dignified—and perhaps flaunts familiarity with certain argumentation in classical attribution studies. For example, 2016, 263: 'To be clear, only the label of the author's name or a rigorous philological examination allows us to accept that the author of *Dubliners* is the same who wrote *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*. And I could continue to list apparent disparities between works that are unequivocally by the same hand. In other words, the cultural education of any high school student should include an introduction to the idea that a writer adapts his writing to ever-changing expressive needs and that a higher or lower note doesn't mean that the singer has changed'.

34 Which I know, admittedly, more second hand than first; for example, through O'Hara 2007, 59–60 or 133–4.

35 Emre and Gutkin 2016.

But Ferrante also conjures the ghost of Homer more directly. It is faintly visible in her (*Frantumaglia*) from the beginning, immediately after the oft-quoted snippet given above:

I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. If they have something to say, they will sooner or later find readers; if not, they won't. There are plenty of examples. I very much love those mysterious volumes, both ancient and modern, that have no definite author but have had and continue to have an intense life of their own. They seem to me a sort of nighttime miracle, like the gifts of Befana, which I waited for as a child ... true miracles are the ones whose makers will never be known.³⁶

Ferrante interestingly avoids naming names here—as if to specify would have violated the very sanctity of those ‘mysterious volumes’ she so venerates. But later in her correspondence, we find this condition exemplified through names. In fact, the gloriously empty vessel of several letters spelling out a name is all that remains of the best authors; which total shrinking is perhaps partly *how* they become ‘the best’ in the first place:

They [the questions] are legitimate, but reductive. For those who love reading, the author is purely a name. We know nothing about Shakespeare. We continue to love the Homeric poems even though we know nothing about Homer. And Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Joyce matter only if a talented person changes them into the subject of an opera, a biography, a brilliant essay, a film, a musical. Otherwise they are names, that is to say labels. Why would anyone be interested in my little personal story if we can do without Homer's or Shakespeare's? Someone who truly loves literature is like a person of faith. The believer knows very well that there is nothing at all at the bureau of vital statistics about the Jesus that truly counts for him.³⁷

36 Ferrante 2016, 15.

37 Ferrante 2016, 206. Cf. Levasseur's interview with Ferrante (2015): ‘If the book doesn't

Classicists are forged in this state of *aporia*: all reliable authorial information about ‘Homer’ has been lost in transmission, and most scholars now question the very existence of a heroic individual as opposed to a shaping collective behind the texts that remain. The Homeric question is a debate only sparked and enabled by the accidental effects of an author’s (tradition’s) fading over time. Ferrante, however, caged in the age of such superabundant authorial information that it is a struggle *not* to know the colour of our new Leopardi’s socks,³⁸ has chosen to recreate Homeric absence for her texts *immediately*; her work is not the leftovers of loss cut from the ragged cloth of unreliable tradition,³⁹ but something shorn of its author’s fingerprints deliberately, by the very hands that brought it into the world.

So this new Helen aspires to be another Homer, not primarily via the conventional route of epic rivalry and emulation, as we might find Virgil or a host of other authors in the male epic tradition grinding out their Bloomian anxieties of influence.⁴⁰ No, Ferrante stakes her claim to the Homeric in a different way: she wants the freedom of the absent author. She spots that many of the literary heroes of the west earned their stripes through Herculean feats of impersonality, of evanescence and quick passage into the bodies of their readers. Or perhaps they earned their stripes *despite* this impersonality; so powerful were their works that their lives were left alone. Like Homer, she wants leave granted, permission not to be there, and to succeed only on the terms of the text; which is tantamount, also, to being a Classic.

have within it the answers to all of the reader’s questions, it means that the book has either turned out badly or that the reader is posing questions that are beyond the book, as if they were saying (and I see this happening more and more): I haven’t read your novel, but all the same I’d like to ask you. Authors—all of them—are considered dead, swept away just like Homer, and all together ready to rise up again each time a reader reads their pages and interrogates them’.

38 Ferrante (2016, 179) uses the example of Leopardi’s socks to caricature excessive biographical criticism. While I tend to agree, it’s worth keeping in mind that a case can still be made for more sophisticated (and sober) biographical criticism (and is made well in Emre and Gutkin 2016); Ferrante’s hard line is not the only way.

39 For dressmaking as metaphor in Ferrante, see Scurr 2016.

40 On which see Hardie 1993.

The (anti-)Platonic author: Elena

If Homer, patron poet of men's men, is more valuable to Ferrante as an idea, or a condition of absence to shoot for, than a furnisher of specific content for 'reception', he is at least named for the job. Our next author Plato isn't even granted this scant privilege, which means my argument in this section will probably fall short of convincing the majority tough crowd that is you, the classicist reader. But try I shall.

Plato is of course one of the masters of authorial absence. His dialogic, quasi-dramatic forms rob the reader of the security of the author's first-person imprimatur—so much so that Platonic scholarship has often orbited around the big question of where to locate 'Plato' in the texts from which he dutifully removes himself (is he behind Socrates? Always? Sometimes? Never?).⁴¹ But he is also, quite emphatically, a *writer in absentia*; one who achieves absence through writing. He is the loyal transcriber of the philosopher who never wrote a thing. He is an author staging his own possession by more present, louder voices from without.

In that sense, he is uncomfortably close to the rhapsodic robot who regurgitates another's words without recasting them in his own image, the negative authorial archetype immortalised in the *Ion*. Plato is one of the first theoreticians of authorship, and the models and metaphors of literary creation that he trashes become Ferrante's treasure. The *Ion* famously ridicules the Homeric rhapsode's authorship that is no real authorship; rather, it is a divine/demonic possession, a disturbing invasion by and echoing of another's words.⁴² Ferrante, by contrast, inverts the Platonic negative that is poetic inspiration into something beautiful;

41 The bibliography makes me giddy, but scratching the surface: Vlastos 1991, Blondell 2002.

42 See Plato *Ion*, especially 533d–535a; 536a–d. Plato's key terms are ἔνθεος and κατεχόμενος. While the myth of inspiration has wide currency in ancient poetry as well, Plato is certainly one of the 'chief sources of the doctrine' for Hellenistic and Roman writers (see Russell 1964, 114; he cites *Phaedrus* 245A and *Meno* 99c–d as well as *Ion*). As the big classical authority on anti-inspiration, it seems likely Ferrante is targeting him here.

indeed, makes it a normative state of her authorship. When asked the usual question about her decision to avoid the spotlight, she disclaims the illusory possessive ‘my’ in ‘my book’—and takes possession instead of the very act of being ‘possessed’:

But maybe I would also like to believe, at certain moments, if not always, that that ‘my’ which I refer to is in substance a convention, so that those who are disgusted by the story that is told and those who are excited by it cannot, in a mistaken logical step, be disgusted or excited by me as well. Perhaps the old myths about inspiration spoke at least one truth: when one makes a creative work, one is inhabited by others—in some measure becomes another. But when one stops writing one becomes oneself again, the person one usually is, in terms of occupations, thoughts, language ... I wrote my book to free myself from it, not to be its prisoner.⁴³

Ferrante’s key term here is actually not possession, but inspiration, or inhabitation: a gentler process at the heart of writing, through which one ‘becomes another’.⁴⁴ The metaphors are subtly different. ‘Possession’ involves a harsh violation of bodily sovereignty, inspiration/inhabitation makes for something less violent, more collaborative. Whereas Plato writes off both by collapsing them, Ferrante saves inspiration from its ransacking double. To that end, she follows another author in the Platonic tradition who is much more receptive on the question of inspiration as *mimesis*, and also actively equates such a poetics with female authorship. [Longinus] tells us that one track to the sublime lies in another form of becoming another (μίμησις):

43 Ferrante 2016, 59.

44 The dissociation of affective response to the story (‘disgusted or excited’) from response to the author sounds a lot like the argument made in the *locus classicus* of author/persona separation: Catullus 16. (Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me.)

ποία δὲ καὶ τίς αὕτη; τῶν ἔμπροσθεν μεγάλων συγγραφέων καὶ ποιητῶν μίμησις τε καὶ ζήλωσις. καί γε τούτου, φίλτατε, ἀπρὶξ ἔχώμεθα τοῦ σκοποῦ· πολλοὶ γὰρ ἀλλοτρίῳ θεοφοροῦνται πνεύματι τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον, ὃν καὶ τὴν Πυθίαν λόγος ἔχει τρίποδι πλησιάζουσαν, ἔνθα ῥήγμά ἐστι γῆς ἀναπνέον ὡς φασιν ἀτμὸν ἔνθεον, αὐτόθεν ἐγκύμονα τῆς δαιμονίου καθισταμένην δυνάμεως παραντίκα χρησμοδεῖν κατ' ἐπίπνοιαν· οὕτως ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν ἀρχαίων μεγαλοφυΐας εἰς τὰς τῶν ζηλούντων ἐκείνους ψυχὰς ὡς ἀπὸ ἱερῶν στομιῶν ἀπόρροιαί τινες φέρονται, ὑφ' ὧν ἐπιπνεόμενοι καὶ οἱ μὴ λίαν φοιβαστικοὶ τῷ ἐτέρων συνενθουσιῶσι μεγέθει. ([Longinus] *On the Sublime* 13.2)

What and what manner of road is this? Zealous imitation of the great prose writers and poets of the past. That is the aim, dear friend; let us hold to it with all our might. For many are carried away by the inspiration of another, just as the story runs that the Pythian priestess on approaching the tripod where there is, they say, a rift in the earth, exhaling divine vapour, thereby becomes impregnated with the divine power and is at once inspired to utter oracles. So, too, from the natural genius of those old writers there flows into the hearts of their admirers as it were an emanation from those holy mouths. Inspired by this, even those who are not easily moved to prophecy share the enthusiasm of these others' grandeur.

The language of inspiration here meshes with the language of pregnancy; both could be covered under the umbrella of 'reproduction' (cf. the quote below). Ferrante's reclaiming of 'inspiration' as an act of authorship coloured by receptivity to others shares something with [Longinus], who parts company from his beloved Plato here, while stalking him closely elsewhere in the treatise (every *mimesis* is also *zēlosis*). Ferrante's endorsement of these myths of inspiration, on the other hand, is a more direct middle finger to Plato, which we shall see holding up in her other twist on a Platonic metaphor below: authorship as parenthood.

As [Longinus] reminds us, this notion of composition as ‘inspiration’ also taps into the classical tradition of women prophets, the spirit of whom is channelled in Ferrante’s fiction. Cassandra and the Cumaean Sibyl surely lie behind Lila’s increasingly inspired and obscure ravings as she gets swallowed up in voicing the cyclical violence of Neapolitan history. As Lenù’s daughter says to her: ‘you write books but you can’t see the future the way Aunt Lina does.’⁴⁵ What makes these figures disturbing to the elite male psyche, in Athens as much as Rome, is their seeming perforation of the line between self and other: they host and contain another soul, another’s words, within them, demonstrate that peculiarly disruptive potential of the woman’s body to hold another inside. In Ferrante, that openness to the other, the concept of all authorship as a form of collaborative absorption, works as a counterblow to this Platonic (and wider) legacy; a legacy, that is, of mythologising authorship as some kind of mystical assertion of the male self’s autonomous body and boundless creative force.

Authorship has always been bound up with concepts of gender and the self. Metaphors of ‘maternity’ and ‘paternity’ are often conscripted to serve as ideals of the bond between author and text; how many of us still hear friends and colleagues equate the fruition of long-term academic and creative projects to child birth? It is on this plane of gendering metaphors that Ferrante has another argument with the Platonic tradition. Plato (/Socrates) is one of the first authors to make absent, empty writing play second fiddle to the present fullness of speech,⁴⁶ but also to figure the relationship between author and text as one of a dominant father stepping in to act as guarantor for son. Just after Socrates retells the myth of the invention of writing, he explains why writing is an inherently vulnerable and secondary form:

45 Ferrante 2015, 444. For other links between Elena Greco’s home in the *Neapolitan Quartet*, and the katabasis of the *Aeneid*, see McCarter 2016.

46 Upending this ‘logocentrism’ and its correlative ‘phallogocentrism’, was one of the first jobs of deconstruction (see Derrida’s 1967 (a, b, c) triad). Note also that the link between rhapsodic and written authorship is made at Plato *Phaedrus* 277E. Ferrante sometimes weighs in directly on the old schism between speech and writing; for example, 2016, 278: ‘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, once it’s fixed on a support structure, is autonomous, it needs a reader, not you’.

ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ: Δεινὸν γάρ που, ὦ Φαίδρε, τοῦτ' ἔχει γραφή, καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὅμοιον ζωγραφία. καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔκγονα ἔστηκε μὲν ὡς ζῶντα, ἐὰν δ' ἀνέρω τι, σεμνῶς πάνυ σιγᾶ. ταῦτόν δὲ καὶ οἱ λόγοι· δόξαις μὲν ἂν ὡς τι φρονούντας αὐτοὺς λέγειν, ἐὰν δέ τι ἔρη τῶν λεγομένων βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἔν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταῦτόν ἀεί. ὅταν δὲ ἅπαξ γραφῆ, κυλινδεῖται μὲν πανταχοῦ πᾶς λόγος ὁμοίως παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαΐουσιν, ὡς δ' αὐτῶς παρ' οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὐκ ἐπίσταται λέγειν οἷς δεῖ γε καὶ μή· πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λαιδορηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ· αὐτὸς γὰρ οὔτ' ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ (Plato *Phaedrus* 275D–E).⁴⁷

Socrates: Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.

Writing is thus conceived as the runt of the litter, always requiring its stronger *paterfamilias* to intercede for it. By contrast, the speech of a man with actual knowledge is deemed the 'legitimate' (γνήσιος) brother of writing (276A), and legitimate son of its maker (278A). The relationships at play here are exclusively the male permutations in the family nucleus: those between father and son, and brother and brother. Writing becomes a problem child, a product of the father who still relies on, but cannot be fully, legally claimed by it; the seal of ownership is unclear. And that disturbing, unmarked status of ownership is precisely what

47 I use the Loeb text and translation (Fowler, 1914).

Ferrante exploits as writing's unique potential. Ferrante's universe is populated by relations between women (usually mother-daughter), and so it comes as no surprise that Plato's metaphor is gender-flipped:

Writing is also a kind of reproduction of life, one marked by contradictory and overwhelming emotions. But the continuum of writing—even with the anguish that you might not always know how to revive it and that no life might ever pass through it again—can be severed, if you need to, out of necessity or other pressing matters. In the end, you have to separate yourself from your books. But you never really cut the umbilical cord. Children always remain an inescapable knot of love, of terrors, of satisfactions and anxieties.⁴⁸

This is a charged moment in Ferrante's critical self-reflection, in so far as it is one of the only times she lets herself equivocate over her usually unwavering hard line on the separation of author and text. Casting that relationship here as one between mother and child⁴⁹—well, more than mother and child, for the umbilical cord is never quite snapped,⁵⁰ and so the definitive moment of bodily separation never quite comes—makes room for something more complex than a father speaking for a mute, inert, illegitimate son. Motherhood is a way of understanding (and embracing) the creative paradox that allows writing to come from and transcend oneself at one and the same time; it is more than the [Longinian] 'pregnancy' above, for motherhood is a *long-term* negotiation between inside and outside, self and other. It also rescues writing from a vertical, hierarchical relationship of

48 Ferrante 2016, 252.

49 Thanks to Emily Hauser for pointing out the deep roots of this metaphor in antiquity: see especially Hauser 2016b, 166–7; and 2016a, 148–51. The metaphor is a perfect site of spark between the 'écriture féminine' of Cixous and the self-creation of ancient female authors (and both traditions constitute Ferrante too): see for example, Hauser 2016a, 148 on Eurydice: 'Eurydice is performing a version of literary gender here that implicates her female authorship with her motherhood, a central feature of Hélène Cixous' later description of 'écriture féminine': 'a woman is never far from 'mother' ... there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink.'

50 Cf. however the closing sentiment of *Frantumaglia* (2016, 381), which talks of writing as 'the thing that separates from us the moment it is complete'.

inferiority beneath the father, and restores it to something both more autonomous (separate) from its creator and yet more genuinely connected with it, bound forever on the same horizontal plane of emotional entanglement. And this is perhaps the moment Ferrante indirectly/unconsciously articulates the latent paradox in the very publication of her multiple interviews and the volume *Frantumaglia* itself, which is designed as a kind of authorial supplement to her supposedly authorless novels—for if she didn't continue to feel some residual attachment or anxiety, some sense of the uncut umbilical cord still tugging away, why would she have bothered? In choosing motherhood as metaphor, her absence is made partial (and gradual), not absolute.

Ferrante thus works with the old Platonic bugbears of authorship (inspiration, writing, absence), and reclaims them as creative possibilities; not as versions of anti- or lesser authorship, but what that status is all about. Caring for something until it is ready to live on its own; stepping back, but not quite letting go. Being a good mother, not a bad father.⁵¹

The Virgilian author: Elena

The last reticent author-participant in our line-up of Elenas is Virgil. We have already mentioned some undeniable connections with the Virgilian urtext, the *Aeneid*: Dido's omnipresence in Ferrante's writing (both 'internal' and 'external'), or the Sibyl as a model of inspired, other-sensitive authorship. In this section, however, I want to argue that Ferrante engages as much with the biographical tradition about Virgil (which sprang, as usual with ancient biographies, from a 'vitalising' reading of his texts)⁵² as she does with Virgil's work. The myth of Virgil's life has a long reach over Ferrante's writing; and by bundling this myth up with her own written life, as well as that of her characters, Ferrante is practising what she preaches: the life of the writer takes place in and as writing.

51 Such hypostasising of an ideal mother figure is a hallmark of difference feminism (see again Tortorici 2015).

52 Barbara Graziosi spearheads this movement of reading ancient lives of poets as displaced reception of their work (e.g. on Homer, see Graziosi 2002, and her project at Durham 'Living Poets'). The *Life of Virgil* comes down to us in/as Donatus, but is widely thought to have been taken over (near intact) from Suetonius: see Naumann 1981, Stok 2010.

Virgil was also, in some ways, a ‘Neapolitan’ writer.⁵³ But there is too much thin air in that factoid to build much of a castle. Rather, let’s assume for a moment that we can make the proscribed link and leap between internal and external. If we take the Elena (Greco) of the *Neapolitan Quartet* as a kind of substitute for/sublimation of/displacement from the Elena (Ferrante) of *Frantumaglia*—a move which seems almost calculated to tempt readers, given all the ‘biographical’ overlaps planted⁵⁴—we can find a further ‘biographical’ link to Virgil straightaway. When Elena writes her first proper piece of fiction, Adele Airota (Elena’s future mother-in-law and heavyweight of the Italian cultural elite) uses her sway to get it out there. Elena is reluctant to let the piece go, since it was written as a flurried first draft, of her first ever written work to boot; surely it must need another once-over? But Adele reassures her with a telling comparison:

‘But I haven’t even reread what I wrote.’ ‘You wrote only a single draft, all at once?’ she asked, vaguely ironic. ‘Yes.’ ‘I assure you that it’s ready for publication.’ ‘I still need to work on it.’ ‘Trust yourself: don’t touch a comma, there is sincerity, naturalness, and a mystery in the writing that only true books have.’ She congratulated me again, although she accentuated the irony. She said that, as I knew, even the *Aeneid* wasn’t polished. She ascribed to me a long apprenticeship as a writer, asked if I had other things, appeared amazed when I confessed that it was the first thing I had written.⁵⁵

This here is the powerful Virgilian myth of incompleteness; the myth that paradoxically guarantees the *Aeneid* a certain kind of ‘natural’ perfection, precisely because it is left dangling, without the rough edges smoothed. The comparison to the *Aeneid* here resonates differently at both internal and external

53 The *Life* mentions Naples twice (Virgil’s nickname *Parthenias* there at 11, his burial and epitaph there at 36); the *Catalepton* (5 and 8) puts Virgil under Siro the Epicurean’s care (a philosopher based in Naples); and see also the *Georgics sphragis* below.

54 In addition to the effect of eponymy (Elena-Elena), there is also: birthplace in Naples, problematic dependence on it as a source of creative energy, studying the Classics, particular obsession with Dido and *Aeneid* 4. All these correspondences twin our Elenas.

55 Ferrante 2013, 120.

levels. Adele assumes this is Elena's last in a long line of works, the tip of the iceberg, the summit of (im)perfection; in reality it's her first (though soon after we hear that Lila's *The Blue Fairy* is the foundation, the 'long apprenticeship' behind this work), so the comparison's validity is then put up for auction. But at the external level, as a kind of meta-comment on the *Neapolitan Quartet* itself, the comparison works better: Elena (Ferrante) does have a host of 'other things' written behind her at this time; and this very work we're reading is the peak of her career, the most epic (and Aeneidesque) in scale and ambition.

Ferrante elsewhere gives a pallet of information about her revision practices, and they come out both similar and different to this moment of Greco's birth as a writer. Ferrante claims to be a chronic and painstaking drafter and re-drafter; and her published works really are the jewels extracted from an incredibly vast scrapheap of material that will never see the light of day.⁵⁶ But she also claims that her published work (especially the *Neapolitan Quartet*) came out differently: much more easily, more flowing, more natural in the sense of Greco's relatively painless first labour.⁵⁷ In several places, she makes a preference for studied incompleteness a kind of marker of writerly maturity: the rough draft is often much better than the overwritten 'finished' version;⁵⁸ writing 'progress' is non-linear, and the temporality of first and final is often inverted:

A page is well written when the labor and the pleasure of truthful narration supplant any other concern, including a concern with formal elegance. I belong to the category of writers who throw out the final draft and keep the rough when this practice ensures a higher degree of authenticity.⁵⁹

So the authenticity of the 'unfinished' is something Ferrante has learned to harness in her own work late in the piece (while Greco seems to have learnt the trick

56 Ferrante 2016, 254.

57 Ferrante 2016, 254.

58 Ferrante 2016, 301.

59 Ferrante 2016, 352.

early). Ferrante, I think, almost reads the Virgilian career as one that culminates not in perfection, but in the incomplete, and maps her own onto it. She almost makes an aesthetic turn of hesitation yielding to accommodation:

Writing has always been a great struggle for me. I would polish it line by line and I wouldn't move forward if I didn't think that what I had already written was perfect, and since the work never seemed perfect I didn't even try to find a publisher. The books that I ultimately published all came with surprising ease, even 'My Brilliant Friend,' although it took me years.⁶⁰

And this kind of growth from struggle to ease, from neurotic revision to going with the flow, channels the gossip on Virgil's progressive relaxation as he moves from the crazed perfection of the *Georgics* to the sublime imperfection of the *Aeneid*:

Cum 'Georgica' scriberet, traditur cotidie meditato mane plurimos versus dictare solitus ac per totum diem retractando ad paucissimos redigere, non absurde carmen se more ursae parere dicens et lambendo demum effingere. 'Aeneida' prosa prius oratione formatam digestamque in XII libros particulatim componere instituit, prout liberet quidque, et nihil in ordinem arripiens. Ac ne quid impetum moraretur, quaedam imperfecta transmisit, alia levissimis verbis veluti fulsit, quae per iocum pro tibicinibus interponi aiebat ad sustinendum opus, donec solidae columnae advenirent. (*Life of Virgil*, 22–25)⁶¹

When he was writing the *Georgics*, it is said to have been his custom to dictate each day a large number of verses which he had composed in the morning, and then to spend the rest of the day in reducing them to a very small number, wittily remarking that he fashioned his poem after the manner of a she-bear, and gradually licked it into shape. In the case of the *Aeneid*, after writing a first draft in prose and dividing it into

60 Ferrante 2016, 254.

61 I use the Loeb text and translation of Suetonius (Rolfe, 1914).

twelve books, he proceeded to turn into verse one part after another, taking them up just as he fancied, in no particular order. And that he might not check the flow of his thought, he left some things unfinished, and, so to speak, bolstered others up with very slight words, which, as he jocosely used to say, were put in like props, to support the structure until the solid columns should arrive.

That embrace of the unfinished, the late return to the rough draft, is how Ferrante structures her ‘Writer’s Journey’; and the lesson is learned from the Virgilian career as much as from her own.

Yet it is a different part of the Virgilian myth which I think steals into some of Ferrante’s most abiding obsessions; a part that shows Virgil learning to bend with the wind in his final moments. Towards the end of the *Life*, we have a parable of authorship, agency and self-destruction (denied). Virgil had made a previous arrangement with his literary executor Varius to burn the *Aeneid* if anything should happen to him; Varius conscientiously objected. So Virgil tries to take matters into his own hands:

igitur in extrema valetudine assidue scrinia desideravit, crematurus ipse; verum nemine offerent nihil quidem nominatim de ea cavit. Ceterum eidem Vario ac simul Tuccae scripta sua sub ea condicione legavit, ne quid ederent, quod non a se editum esset. Edidit autem auctore Augusto Varius, sed summatim emendata, ut qui versus etiam imperfectos sicut erant reliquerit (*Life of Virgil*, 39–41)

Therefore in his mortal illness Virgil constantly called for his book-boxes, intending to burn the poem himself; but when no one brought them to him, he made no specific request about the matter, but left his writings jointly to the above mentioned Varius and to Tucca, with the stipulation that they should publish nothing which he himself would not have given to the world. However, Varius published the *Aeneid* at Augustus’ request, making only a few slight corrections, and even leaving the incomplete lines just as they were.

The anecdote can be read as a statement about authorial control over textual legacy. At first, Virgil tries to preserve his rights of self-destruction; but now that the poem is almost ready, indeed has passed outside himself, it is no longer his to self-destruct. The *Aeneid* now belongs to Varius and Tucca, now to Augustus; the final editorial touches (or non-touches) stamp the text with its unmistakable seal of authenticity. All of these new figures have a vested interest in defying Virgil's instructions, and preserving the text he wanted to see go up in flames. Once an author is dead, his first readers are free to disregard his wishes.

This tension between self-destructive and preservative authorship is at the heart of Ferrante's poetics. The *Neapolitan Quartet's* two central characters, Lila and Elena, broadly circle these two poles in their approach to life and art (though their relationship is much more dynamic, a constant contortion of pushes and pulls, than a straight opposition could ever capture). Lila is a staple whirlwind force of creation and destruction, a kind of Stoic embodiment of the cyclical universe that is her hometown of Naples. Her locally acclaimed artwork, a collaboration between her and Elena which is stuck up on the wall of the Solara shoe shop, is a photograph of herself striated into pieces. When Elena returns Lila's childhood story *The Blue Fairy* to her—the story Elena identifies as the beating heart inside her own first major work—Lila tosses it nonchalantly into the fire of the sausage factory. This kind of destruction, granted, seems to invert the Virgilian myth: here the author is allowed full destruction rights over her work (even if the cleanness of the cut is compromised by the passage of Lila's work into hers). Elena lets herself be swept along by that same destructive fury at times: she throws Lila's notebooks into the Arno after she has used them to form her own account of a certain part of the story. But most of the time, she resists, and stubbornly. In fact, the *Neapolitan Quartet* as a whole is framed as one large act of written resistance. It is the story of a woman who wanted to disappear without a trace, but who is denied the privilege. Her defiant narrator of a friend says not so fast, you do not belong to you: you will be pickled in my text. In that sense, the *Tetralogy* becomes a story about the equilibrium of preservation and annihilation. The ultimate fates of a text, and a self, aren't settled by their makers; they are the business of someone else. Elena Greco becomes the executor of her self-

destructive best friend's legacy, an Augustus to her Virgil. And she won't let her Virgil die unwritten.

From the ancient biographer's perspective, Virgil was a perfect and victimless crime: his notorious modesty,⁶² and his reluctance really to 'enter' any of his works apart from indirectly; for example, via notional pseudonyms in the *Eclogues*, left him a blank slate to toy with as per one's pleasure. But at certain points in the corpus, the first-person poet wormed his way in; and it is one of these charged points on which I would like to end. At the end of the *Georgics*, Virgil famously stamps his work with a *sphragis*,⁶³ which sums up his literary career to date: he has been singing agriculture (*Georgics*), arboriculture, animal husbandry, on top of 'these things' (*haec*—meaning Book 4). This is the very same author who once brought you the *Eclogues*:

Illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
Parthenope studiis florentem ignobilis oti,
carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuventa
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi. (*Georgics* 4.563–6)⁶⁴

In those days I, Virgil, was nursed by sweet Parthenope, and rejoiced in the arts of inglorious ease—I who toyed with shepherds' songs, and, in youth's boldness, sang of you, Tityrus, under the canopy of a spreading beech.

The data he gives us here is that he was in Naples while writing the *Georgics*; and that he wrote the *Eclogues* in his youth, while he/Tityrus was lying under a spreading beech. Virgil, in his poetic autograph, only really exists as the author of his works; again, he exists only in and as his writing. It is this tradition of the end-stopping, career-summing *sphragis* that flickers behind Ferrante's own paratextual technique at the end of *Frantumaglia*. She reserves a full section entitled 'About the Author', which is really nothing more than a paragraph of her unadorned bibliography embedded in a morass of blank pages:

62 *Life of Virgil* 11.

63 On this *sphragis* as paratext, see Peirano 2014, 227–31.

64 I use the Loeb text and translation (Fairclough 1916, revised by Goold).

Elena Ferrante is the author of *The Days of Abandonment* (Europa, 2005), *Troubling Love* (Europa, 2006), *The Lost Daughter* (Europa, 2008) and the *Neapolitan Quartet* (Europa, 2012–2015). She is also the author of a children’s picture book illustrated by Mara Cerri, *The Beach at Night*.⁶⁵

After this, we fall into complete silence, flicking through twelve white pages of an author eliminated. This is what *Frantumaglia*, the book of herself, boils down to. Ferrante takes ‘About the Author’ literally and literarily. We only need to know this author *qua* author; and the sparing self-citation ends up as much an acknowledgement of her collaborator Maria Cerri as it is a Ferrante bibliography. The *sphragis* is a seal saying ‘also by me (and others)’, not ‘also about me’. About is irrelevant; the true predicate of the author is a reading list.

The Classical author: Elena

I have tried to show throughout this article that Ferrante’s writing (fiction and non-fiction) is so deeply tangled with classical modes of authorship, and figures of the author, that Ferrante means effectively to textualise herself into a ‘classic’. At the beginning of her career, she tied herself to Homer, and withdrew into a mere name. At some point, she started flipping Platonic myths of authorship, from possession to inspired hosting, paternity to maternity, complicating her chosen form of self-effacing absence; more recently, her focus on revision practices as performances of authenticity, the taut rope connecting preservation and destruction, as well as her paratextual afterwords,⁶⁶ seem to raise the spectre of Virgilian myths from *Life* and work.

65 Ferrante 2016, 389.

66 The ‘afterword’ is in fact how Ferrante accommodates herself to the project of *Frantumaglia* when it is first floated (a prospect she meets with lukewarmth): ‘Which is to say that, if you decide to publish it, you have to do so feeling that it is editorially, as an appendix to those two books, a sort of slightly dense afterword, as you used to do once at the end of your elegant volumes, an afterword that because of its excessive mass became a volume on its own’. In this way, we could conceive of the *Frantumaglia* project and *sphragis* as structural equivalents: they are pieces of information designed to be spatially subordinate; they must come ‘after’ the work.

All the material I have collected is more comparative than concrete; much of it will please no one. But, as I said at the beginning, Ferrante leaves us bracingly free to trace the filaments of a tradition running through her unconsciously; indeed, she positively eggs us on to the task. Her world is a synchronic one, where authors are not heroic autonomous egos, but meshed nodes of ‘collective intelligence’ (this in response to a question on whether Ferrante sees in Lila’s writing an ideal she herself aims for):

In the end what is set on the page is a highly composite, immaterial organism, made up of me who writes and of Lenù, let’s say, and of the many people and things she narrates and the way in which she narrates and in which I narrate her, not to mention the literary tradition I draw on, and learned from, and everything that makes the writer a component of a creative collective intelligence—the language as its spoken where we were born and grew up, the stories that were told to us, the ethics we acquired, and so on—in other words the fragments of a very long history that drastically reduces our function as ‘authors’, as we understand the word today.⁶⁷

It is this recantation of the myth of individual subjectivity that makes Ferrante’s theory of authorship so generous;⁶⁸ and so important; and so true, especially for the author behind this article, as I look over my notes and wonder how many of my thoughts about Elena were settled in tandem and conversation with my partner.⁶⁹ As a self-styled mouthpiece of collective intelligence, Ferrante has others speak through her, a Sibylline medium ventriloquised by the voices of the dead:

I can’t even think without the voices of others, much less write. And I’m not talking only about relatives, female friends, enemies ... I’m talking about the past, about what we generally call tradition; I’m

67 Ferrante 2016, 288.

68 Seeing literature as a social process is thankfully becoming more mainstream in Classics nowadays: see for example, Gurd 2012.

69 Francesca Bellei, whom I thank and love.

talking about all those others who were once in the world and who have acted or who now act through us. Our entire body, like it or not, enacts a stunning resurrection of the dead just as we advance towards our own death. We are, as you say, interconnected. And we should teach ourselves to look deeply at this interconnection—I call it a tangle, or, rather, *frantumaglia*—to give ourselves adequate tools to describe it. In the most absolute tranquility or in the midst of tumultuous events, in safety or danger, in innocence or corruption, we are a crowd of others. And this crowd is certainly a blessing for literature.⁷⁰

The I as crowd:⁷¹ this is how Elena Ferrante becomes the Classics.

70 Ferrante 2016, 366.

71 Cf. Ferrante 2016, 322.

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