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Compliant and impetuous: the phenomenology of existence in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a philosophical reading of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels by bringing the tetralogy into conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological ontology. In addition to highlighting the striking similarities between Ferrante's notion of *smarginatura* ('dissolving margins') and Sartre's depiction of the existential sensation of nausea, this article argues that the two main characters of Ferrante's tetralogy, Lila Cerullo and Elena Greco, respectively exemplify Sartre's ontological categories of 'being-for-oneself' and 'being-for-others' in his phenomenological account of human existence. However, Ferrante—like Simone de Beauvoir before her—goes beyond Sartre in her ability to offer an account of the imperfect existential freedom of women, who remain constrained in their pursuit of authenticity by social and cultural factors. Drawing on Ferrante's assertion that readers 'are both Elena and Lila' as well as her recent claim that there are within her two kinds of writing (broadly equated to the 'compliant' Elena and 'impetuous' Lila), we establish Ferrante's exploration of the ambivalent features of human subjectivity as a consummate philosophical and literary project.

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Across a number of works, the contemporary Italian author Elena Ferrante, whose novels have achieved both success on the global literary market and attracted considerable interest among scholars, presents a framework for interpreting women's lives which connects to a broader philosophical project concerned with human relationality, subjectivity and existential authenticity in the modern world. Ferrante's most discussed work is the tetralogy known as The Neapolitan Novels or The Neapolitan Quartet (published 2011–2014), which tells the story of a friendship between Elena Greco (the narrator) and Lila Cerullo, born in the working-class suburbs

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of Naples in the mid-twentieth century, that extends over sixty years.[1] Their fragmented relationship is reflective of and constructed against patriarchal modes of relating to self and other, connected to Ferrante's broader preoccupation with ambivalence as key to understanding ourselves and our lived experiences.

As Barbara Alfano remarks, with Ferrante's delicate and perceptive depiction of human interiority and relations, there are many elements in her series that 'lend the Neapolitan tetralogy to a phenomenological reading'.[2] However, as Sam Shpall observes, Ferrante's works 'have so far received little sustained philosophical attention, and virtually no attention from academic philosophers'.[3] This article offers a philosophical—and indeed phenomenological—reading of Ferrante's work by bringing the Neapolitan tetralogy into conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy while also showing ways in which Ferrante goes beyond Sartre in her observations of the complexities of the human condition. As we argue, Ferrante's portrayal of Lila's and Elena's personalities and inner lives can be understood not only as an analysis of the different existential facets of the human condition, but more specifically one which shares parallels with Simone de Beauvoir's development and critique of Sartrean existential phenomenology.

Building on existing feminist analyses of the ways in which the experience and subjectivity of characters like Elena are framed and shaped by female stereotypes and social roles, this article presents a broader phenomenological reading of Neapolitan Novels which highlights how the factical constraints on Elena's existence are not simply societal or reducible to female identity, but also include the existential conditions that apply to human lived experiences across particular gender divides.[4] At the same time, while Sartre's rendition of authentic human existence as 'being-for-oneself' and inauthentic existence as 'being-for-others' can provide an illuminating framework for understanding Ferrante's depiction of the characters of Lila and Elena, unlike Sartre's clear and sharp distinction between authentic being-for-oneself and inauthentic being-for-others, Ferrante 'dissolves' the neat boundaries between authentic and inauthentic existence. For Ferrante, authenticity is always—and only—a fleeting mode of existence: authenticity always inevitably dissolves and is only truly actualised in absence, as in Lila's desire to 'disappear without leaving a trace'.[5]

In this regard, Ferrante can be understood as a thinker who shares much of Sartre's insights on human existence, but also one who, like Beauvoir before her, goes beyond Sartre in nuancing or even dissolving any sharp boundaries drawn between authenticity and inauthenticity in order to highlight the existential constraints placed upon women. Indeed, we might see Ferrante as presenting an existential phenomenology of *smarginatura*

where to dissolve the self and its boundaries is the only way to escape such constraints. Ultimately, in the vanishing of Lila which bookends the tetralogy, Ferrante suggests that true freedom—being-for-oneself—is not possible, particularly for women, in the world in its current state where patriarchy remains, for the author, 'more alive than ever'.[6]

Stiliana Milkova has presented a convincing account of Ferrante's two neologistic concepts *smarginatura* ('dissolving margins' in Ann Goldstein's English translation) and *frantumaglia* (Ferrante's word for female psychological breakdown under the pressures of patriarchy) as the coordinates of a consummate 'feminine imaginary'.[7] In the present work, we argue that *smarginatura* is also the tool, in Ferrante's works, for the expression of a condition of existential breakdown which suggests a dissolving of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence that affects all human subjects in Ferrante's literary universe. Where Ferrante's female characters fail in the careful acts of self-containment which are at the heart of their narrative (that which Ferrante terms 'surveillance'),[8] this reflects the way in which the world itself is seen to lack margins, and is the site of the author's repudiation of the idea of the human subject as a discrete and self-contained entity. In other words, Ferrante suggests that we are all caught up in a process of decline over which we have no control and that the 'modern world subjects us to pressures that at times we are not able to bear'.[9]

The first part of this article highlights the remarkable parallels between Ferrante's *smarginatura* and Sartre's nausea. The second part then offers a reading of Lila's and Elena's respective modes of existence in the Neapolitan tetralogy through Sartre's typologies of 'being-for-oneself' and 'being-for-others'. Whereas Elena has the tendency to conform her existence to societal norms and expectations and conduct her life in a mannered and orderly fashion, with her insight into the disorderly or even meaningless nature of the world through her experience of *smarginatura*, Lila exists and lives her life in a way which mirrors that same lack of order and coherence which she perceives as the core of she and Elena's lives. Nevertheless, as we shall show, Lila's apparent 'authenticity' conceals within it traces of inauthenticity and cannot exist independently of the brilliance of Elena, of whom Lila asks 'who am I if you aren't great, who am I?'[10] The third part connects this reading of Elena and Lila's two interconnected modes of existence to the two different kinds of writing, one 'compliant' and one 'impetuous', which Ferrante discusses in her recent account of her own practices of writing, *In the Margins* (2021).[11] Highlighting how Ferrante sees 'impetuousness' as always dependent on 'compliance', we lastly show how Ferrante goes beyond Sartre in a more nuanced depiction of authentic and inauthentic existence which accounts for dimensions of the human condition often not adequately apprehended by male theorists.

Reality: 'reducing it to its true nature … '

Smarginatura has attracted much interest among scholars, who have interpreted this enigmatic notion as 'a sensation of reality collapsing',[12] of 'spatio-temporal breakdown',[13] or indeed of a 'shattering [of] the surface level of reality' which reveals 'the nucleus of hidden truth that lies beneath'.[14] While existing interpretations have highlighted the ways in which *smarginatura* resonates with feminist theoretical motifs,[15] there has been little if any comparison of Ferrante's perplexing notion to Sartre's similarly mysterious account of *Nausea* in his famous 1938 novel of the same title.[16]

The first description of *smarginatura* in Ferrante's tetralogy appears in book one, where sixteen-year-old Elena is attending a New Year's Eve party with Lila and her brother Rino:

> The thing was happening to her that I mentioned and that she later called dissolving margins. It was—she told me—as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon's circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, *reducing it to its true nature of rough insensate material*. Lila imagined, she saw, she felt—as if it were true—her brother break. Rino, before her eyes, lost the features he had had as long as she could remember … something violated the organic structure of her brother, exercising over him a pressure so strong that it broke down his outlines, and the matter expanded like a magma, *showing her what he was truly made of* … she had the impression that, as Rino moved, as he expanded around himself, *every margin collapsed and her own margins, too, became softer and more yielding*.[17]

The young Lila's experience of *smarginatura* reveals to her the 'true nature' of the world as 'rough insensate material' (*grezza materia insensata*)—or indeed rough *senseless* material—that is somehow 'softer and more yielding' when the clear and distinct structures and outlines of objects in the world are dissolved. It is a violent and jarring sensation, entailing physiological and physical collapse as well as the collapse of the subject experiencing such a moment.

The most detailed and significant account of *smarginatura* appears almost 20 years later in the final book of Ferrante's tetralogy, when Elena and Lila experience the Irpinia earthquake of 1980. This is also the first time that Lila names the sensations by which she has been afflicted since childhood:

> Gasping for breath, she cried out that the car's boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh.
>
> She used that term: *dissolving boundaries*. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and

> how much it frightened her … She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—*it was absolutely not like that*—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped … if she became distracted real things, which, with their violent, painful contortions, terrified her, would gain the upper hand over the unreal ones, which, with their physical and moral solidity, pacified her; she would be plunged into a sticky, jumbled reality and would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines.[18]

When 'reduc[ed] to its true nature' as 'senseless material' through the experience of *smarginatura*,[19] the world no longer consists of clear and distinct intelligible objects with well-defined firm boundaries or outlines: 'physical and moral solidity' is 'unreal'. The world in its true nature is far 'softer': it is 'a sticky, jumbled reality' that does not have any fixed structures which give it any intrinsic meaning. The city of Naples, as the earthquake reveals and Ferrante further confirms, is the spatial signifier of this blurring of moral and material distinctions: 'For Lila and Lena, Naples is the city where beauty spills over into horror, where good manners can be instantly transformed into violence, where every Reclamation covers a Demolition'.[20] The distinction between the collapse of Naples and the collapse of the wider world is that Naples' disorienting blend of beauty and decay does not to seek to hide its true condition, but rather acts as an ethical signifier: 'What we could be, on this planet, and what, instead, unfortunately, we are, can be seen more clearly in Naples than elsewhere.'[21] This breakdown of 'clear outlines', the 'violent, painful contortions' of *smarginatura* point to all that is wrong with the world and with the human persons who inhabit it.

The contingency and fragility of material forms and human lives signified by *smarginatura* finds a clear precedent in Sartre. The experience of the dissolution of firm boundaries and intelligible structures, which Ferrante expresses both physically through the urban setting of Naples and psychically in the human person of Lila, is precisely what Sartre tries to capture with the notion of nausea in his 1938 novel. Just as the world is experienced by Ferrante's Lila as 'a sticky, jumbled reality' through the sensation of *smarginatura*, 'the naked World' reveals itself as a formless, less solid, 'softer' and indeed 'sticky' reality to Antoine Roquentin (Sartre's protagonist in *Nausea*) through the experience of nausea:

> Had I dreamed of this enormous presence? It was there, in the garden, toppled down into the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly [*toute molle, poissant tout, tout épaisse, une confiture*] … I hated this ignoble mess [*ignoble marmelade*]. Mounting up, mounting up as high as the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither … I was not surprised, I

> knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being.[22]

Sartre's account of the 'softness' and 'stickiness' of reality is not simply an absurdist or nihilistic declaration of the intrinsic meaninglessness of the world, but in fact intricately connected to technical philosophical insights within phenomenology.[23]

Following Husserl's account of phenomenological reduction in which the observer is called to suspend or bracket out any *a priori* presuppositions in phenomenological analyses, Sartre's description of the sensation of nausea is one where one's preconceived ideas or names of objects—e.g. the 'chairness' of the four-legged object in the room or the 'treeness' of the brown object with green things stuck to it—are suspended from one's experience of them: such that one no longer recognises the pre-defined 'chairness' of the chair before oneself or the 'treeness' of the tree one sees, but rather experiences things as they are revealed in—and indeed 'reduced' to—their 'inert, nameless' bare existence without any pre-established ideas or frameworks.[24] To put it in Ferrante's language from her description of Lila's first experience of *smarginatura*: reality is 'reduc[ed] to its true nature'.[25]

Indeed, in *Nausea*, when the world is revealed and reduced to its 'inert, nameless' reality, one no longer recognises things by the names, meanings, or purposes with which they had been previously (and conventionally) associated:

> I lean my hand on the seat but pull it back hurriedly: it exists. This thing I'm sitting on, leaning my hand on, is called a seat. They made it purposely for people to sit on, they took leather, springs and cloth, they went to work with the idea of making a seat and when they finished, that was what they had made. They carried it here, into this car and the car is now rolling and jolting with its rattling windows, carrying this red thing in its bosom. I murmur: 'It's a seat', a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing … Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me.[26]

Like how words and names no longer attach to things amidst Roquentin's state of nausea, the connection or association between words and things, between meaning and objects, are for Ferrante's Lila *not* an intrinsic part of the real world, but instead only exist fictitiously in novels or other kinds of human artifices. One might even say that the very notions of 'order' and 'coherence' are ones whose existence Lila struggles to accept, as suggested by her response to Elena's self-understanding of the profession of the author:

> I [Elena] said, pretending to be amused:
>
> 'Don't discourage me. In my job I have to paste one fact to another with words, and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not.'
>
> 'But if the coherence isn't there, why pretend?'
>
> 'To create order … '
>
> She narrowed her eyes. She said softly:
>
> 'I told you that I don't understand anything.'[27]

The lack of connection between words and things that Lila perceives, and her scorning of Elena's need to 'paste one fact to another', are particularly notable in her remarks on disassociating or indeed 'untying' one's name from oneself as a fleshy being:

> Eh, she said once, what a fuss for a name: famous or not, it's only a ribbon tied around a sack randomly filled with blood, flesh, words, shit, and petty thoughts. She mocked me at length on that point: I untie the ribbon—*Elena Greco*—and the sack stays there, it functions just the same, haphazardly, of course, without virtues or vices, until it breaks. On her darkest days she said with a bitter laugh: I want to untie my name, slip it off me, throw it away, forget it … *So much fuss about the greatness of this one and that one, but what virtue is there in being born with certain qualities, it's like admiring the bingo basket when you shake it and good numbers come out*.[28]

As further discussed below, Lila's rejection of the intrinsic meaning or order of reality or indeed of any inborn human 'qualities' or 'virtues' closely resembles Sartre's well-known rebuttal of essentialist conceptions of innate human nature and his emphasis that authentic human existence consists in breaking free from any extrinsic meanings or identities that are imposed onto one's life and being.[29] Just as *smarginatura* undoes or disarticulates the ordered 'sense' or 'nature' of the material world, in the quest for existential authenticity, it is Lila who 'untie[s] the ribbon' of Elena's reliance on ordered narratives and clear definitions.

Existence: 'always in the same place and always out of place … '

Like the suspension of intrinsic meaning in the world in *Nausea*, Sartre's rejection of any innate human nature or essence is rooted in a phenomenological account of human consciousness, as systematically developed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Building on Husserl's dictum that 'all consciousness is conscious of something other than itself', Sartre argues that insofar as the human subject is a conscious being that is conscious of something that is *other than* itself or indeed 'outside' itself, there can be no substance or nature intrinsic to the conscious human being: 'There is nothing substantial

about consciousness … it is total void (since the entire world is outside it).'[30] A sense of emptiness, lack, or indeed nothingness thus lies at the heart of what Sartre regards to be the authentic mode of existence of the human being *qua* conscious subject: the conscious human subject is 'a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is', and to deviate from this sense of conscious subjectivity would constitute a mode of inauthentic *self-objectification* which Sartre names 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*).[31] As Lior Levy notes: 'When in bad faith, consciousness treats itself as an object, either by [erroneously] believing that it *is* what it is not … or that it is not what it *is*.'[32]

The most famous discussion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* is Sartre's memorable illustration of the waiter, who is described critically as 'playing *at being* a waiter in a café'.[33] Sartre's italics here highlight the fact that the waiter is playing at being a waiter in the same sense in which 'this inkwell is an inkwell, or the glass is a glass'.[34] The waiter is a conscious human subject and 'does not have fixed waiterly properties that determine what he does in the way in which the properties of a coffee machine determine what it does'—for 'the set of fixed waiterly properties is simply an ideal to which waiters are to aspire'.[35] But by conforming to or indeed 'playing' the pre-defined role of 'waiter', Sartre's waiter exemplifies bad faith insofar as he *self-objectifies* his existence as though he were an inanimate object determined by a fixed set of waiterly properties—not an authentically free and conscious human subject but what Beauvoir (following and explicating Sartre) calls 'a living doll'.[36]

As opposed to the authentic mode of human existence which Sartre calls 'being-for-itself' or 'being-for-oneself' (*être-pour-soi*), in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre connects this inauthentic self-objectification to the mode of existence that he calls 'being-for-others' (*être-pour-autrui*),[37] in which the conscious human being is succumbed to the objectifying 'gaze' of the Other.[38] According to Sartre, it is through encountering and recognising another person as a conscious *subject*—as an 'Other'—that we come to realise that we are often perceived as an *object* by 'Others'.[39] This sense of being an object before the Other is parallel to the way in which a free conscious human being de-subjectifies oneself in the state of bad faith to a quasi-inanimate existence of objectness as if one had a pre-determined fixed nature—like how the waiter plays at being a waiter in the same sense in which 'this inkwell is an inkwell, or the glass is a glass'.[40] As Sartre puts it: 'the Other is first the being for whom I am as an object; that is, the being *through whom* I gain my objectness … For the Other *I am seated as* this inkwell *is on* the table … If there is an Other … I have a *nature*.'[41]

In the Neapolitan tetralogy, Elena's intellectual pursuits are not motivated by interest in fundamental questions of existence, truth or goodness, but

rather driven by gaining attention and praise from teachers and peers—the recognition of Others. While we see the quest for recognition extend towards the wider society in Elena's career as a writer, her ongoing preoccupation with Lila's evaluation of her success as a writer reveals that the ultimate 'Other' for Elena is in fact not her former teachers, lovers, readers or the public, but her childhood friend Lila. To this extent, as the entire tetralogy is framed as Elena's introspective narration of her own life in light of Lila's, the figure of Lila may be regarded as 'the Other' *par excellence*—the external author and creator of value and meaning for Elena's 'being-for-other': '[Lila] always dominated all of us and had imposed and was still imposing a way of being.'[42]

Just as Sartre points out that in the state of 'being-for-others' one does not simply become unconscious but remains *conscious of* being objectified, Elena is acutely aware of her tendency to conform to pre-determined social roles and peer expectations. This is perhaps most evident in Elena's perception of her own daughter's personality:

> I had recognised in her features of mine that I didn't like. She was submissive, she gave in immediately out of fear of not being liked, it depressed her that she had given in. I would have preferred her to inherit Nino's bold capacity for seduction, his thoughtless vitality, but she wasn't like that. Imma was unhappily compliant [*di un'acquiescenza scontenta*], she wanted everything and pretended to want nothing.[43]

The tendency to conform to social expectations and the desire to be liked in Elena is also recognised by other characters such as Armando Galiani, who makes the following comparison between Elena and Lila in conversation with Elena:

> [Elena asks,] 'Why did you start doing this job?'
>
> 'For the same reason you do yours.'
>
> 'What's that?'
>
> 'Once I was unable to hide behind anything, I discovered I was vain.'
>
> 'Who says I'm vain?'
>
> 'The comparison: your friend isn't. But I'm sorry for her, vanity is a resource. If you're vain you pay attention to yourself and your affairs. Lina [Lila's nickname] is without vanity, so she lost her daughter.'[44]

Vanity, here, can be read as partly synonymous with surveillance, which Ferrante sees as 'a salutary rather than purely disciplinary activity' for women.[45] The resource of 'vanity' (literary exposure and professional success, in Elena's case) is what enables her to 'pay attention to [her]self and [her] affairs', to hold things together. In comparison to Elena's being-for-others,

throughout the tetralogy Lila's character appears to—at least in Elena's eyes—exhibit an authentic existence of 'being-for-oneself', which is most clearly expressed in Lila's reckless rejection of the requirement for things to hold together ('I untie the ribbon'), informed by her insights from *smarginatura*, which at times brings devastating consequences ('she lost her daughter').

In contrast with the way in which Elena's own mode of existence is summarised by her dying mother as 'you are you, so I have confidence',[46] Elena describes Lila's mode of being in the world in a very different way:

> I attributed to her a sort of farsightedness, as I had all our lives, and I found nothing wrong with it. I said to myself that to be adult was to recognise that I needed her impulses … I was I and for that very reason I could make space for her in me and give her an enduring form. *She instead didn't want to be her,* so she couldn't do the same.[47]

Whereas Elena *is* Elena ('you are you') and is somewhat content to be who she is or indeed *what* she *is*,[48] Elena recognises that Lila does *not* want to be who or what she is, but exists instead in a mode which Sartre terms *being-for-oneself*—'being what it is not and not being what it is'—which refuses to conform to any externally imposed meaning or identity.[49] As Nino Sarratore summarises Lila's character in book three: 'she doesn't know how to submit to reality, she's incapable of accepting others and herself.'[50] Lila's refusal to submit to reality or to accept her identity is manifested not only in the episode where Lila speaks of 'untying' one's name from one's being, but more directly in her apparent rejection of any intrinsic or determined meaning in life:

> I [Elena] replied: If Imma leaves me, too, my life will no longer have meaning. But [Lila] smiled: Where is it written that lives should have a meaning? So she began to disparage all that struggle of mine to write. She said mockingly: Is the meaning that line of black markings that look like insect shit?[51]

Or as Pasquale Peluso remarks in his important conversation with Elena in the closing pages of the tetralogy: 'Ah, Lila the shoemaker, Lila who imitated Kennedy's wife, Lila the artist and designer, Lila the worker, Lila the programmer, Lila always in the same place and always out of place.'[52]

As opposed to Elena's willingness to conform to social roles or positions in an inauthentic mode of 'being-for-others' and her reliance on literary forms to lend stability to the world and her own fragile self-image, Lila appears to exist authentically as 'being-for-oneself' that is not fixed to any particular social 'place' or identity, rejecting the possibility of a singular, coherent narrative to tie things down. However, Lila's disdain for those, principally Elena and Nino, who 'act like intellectuals'—not unlike Sartre's waiter who 'plays at being a waiter'—is also a window on her own *in*authenticity.[53] Though her education is curtailed, Lila continues to read voraciously, even winning a prize for being

the most assiduous reader from the neighbourhood library.[54] Later, her spiteful accusation that Elena is an educated 'puppet' who attends soirees in well-to-do quarters of the city in order to talk vacuously of lofty ideas is a front for her wounded pride and frustrated ambition.[55] Most tellingly, even whilst insisting that '[t]o write, you have to want something to survive you. I don't even have the desire to live', Lila does believe very concretely in the power of the published word to enact positive change that will benefit future generations. When in the fourth novel she and Elena pen a co-authored article denouncing the Solara brothers' criminal activities, Lila attributes almost magical power both to the text and to Elena as an author, whom she now sees as holding 'the power that as children we had ascribed to the author of *Little Women*'.[56] Such is the strength of her conviction that words can bring down her oppressors that when the piece is rejected by Elena's publisher, Lila has the article published elsewhere, under Elena's name—as though playing at being Elena—without telling her friend.[57]

In all this, Lila is clearly exhibiting *bad faith*: she intentionally plays the part of an anti-intellectual, while secretly retaining her childhood belief in the power of education, sometimes even competing with Elena, defining herself against Elena as her 'other'—inauthentically being-for-Elena.[58] Far from categorically rejecting Elena's intellectual persona, Lila continues to threaten to resume her interrupted formation, subsuming Elena's brilliance in her own: 'I'll enrol in a private school, start studying again, and I swear I'll get my diploma along with you and I'll do better than you.'[59] For Ferrante, whilst existing as part of the world in its present state one can never be fully authentic *per se*—not even Lila. Unlike Sartre who famously declares we are 'condemned to freedom',[60] Ferrante believes that we are condemned to the inauthentic state of being-for-others, even whilst telling ourselves that we are acting for ourselves alone. As we shall see in the next section, Ferrante's postulation of *in*authenticity as the universal original position of human existence is not only one key place where she differs from Sartre. It is also where she goes beyond Sartre to recognise the lived realities of the human condition, where many—especially women—are constrained to the boundaries and orders of the world, resisting the confines of which Elena and Lila, in their successes and failures, are 'two dominated subjects attempting to achieve emancipation.'[61]

Compliant and impetuous: 'the possibility of feeling that they are both Elena and Lila … '

While Ferrante does not use Sartre's ontological terminology, her depiction of the differences between the two friends in an interview confirms our phenomenological reading of her tetralogy:

> Lila is the kind of person who cannot bring herself to accept boundaries except to break them, but then gives up under the strain. Elena learns immediately to make use of the school environment, as she will later learn to make use of the many other spaces she occupies in the course of her life.[62]

What we find in Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy is the story of two friends who respectively exemplify, but also challenge, Sartre's typologies of being-for-oneself and being-for-others. We will now offer a fuller account of this challenge in its implications for female subjectivity and for the act of writing as one which contains and expresses Ferrante's understanding of the ambivalence of the human condition.

Towards the end of the tetralogy, in the aftermath of Lila's disappearance, some years after the disappearance of her daughter Tina (who shares the name of Elena's lost childhood doll), Elena mysteriously receives the two dolls which she and Lila had lost almost six decades earlier.[63] The close of Ferrante's story and Elena's narrative is marked by a simultaneous loss and recovery: the disappearance of Lila and her daughter Tina and the subsequent reappearance of Lila's and Elena's long-lost dolls, Nu and Tina. Just as Tina the doll—an inanimate object—is recovered while Tina the daughter—a conscious human subject—is lost in the conclusion of the tetralogy, Elena is the one who remains present at the very end while Lila disappears. The parallels of the concluding presence or even persistence of Elena *and* her inanimate doll Tina after the disappearance of Lila *and* her human daughter Tina reinforce the foregoing interpretation of Elena's and Lila's divergent modes of existence: as opposed to the object-like or even *doll*-like state of being-for-others in which Elena exists with her tendency (or 'bad faith') to conform to others' standards and expectations, Lila exists authentically as a conscious human subject which Sartre terms being-for-oneself. As though underscoring Elena's perpetual existence as being-for-others, the ambiguous and unexplained gift of the missing toys after so many years implies that she has, in one sense, been Lila's substitute plaything, her 'living doll',[64] all along: 'All our lives she had told a story of redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence.'[65]

In her new essay collection *In the Margins*, we find a striking parallel between Ferrante's depiction of ways of existing in the world and her emphasis on different kinds of narration (orderly vs. disorderly [*smarginato*]) as the tool by which this is accessed. The two modes of existence depicted of Elena's being-for-others and Lila's being-for-oneself in the Neapolitan tetralogy are further reflective of the two kinds of writings Ferrante describes in the opening essay of *In the Margins*:

> [There are] the two kinds of writing it seems to me I know best, the first compliant [*acquiescente*], the second impetuous [*impetuosa*] … one that had been mine since my school years, and which had always assured me praise from the

> teachers (Brava, you'll be a writer someday); and another that peeped out by surprise and then vanished, leaving me unhappy.[66]

According to Ferrante, whereas the first kind of 'compliant' writing makes her 'feel cramped [and] uncomfortable' in its stasis and fixity, the second kind of 'impetuous' writing only comes to her as an 'irrepressible burst' in fleeting 'wonderful moments':

> It appears, as far as I can tell, in the first lines, but I can't sustain it, and it disappears. Or it erupts after pages and pages and advances insolently, without tiring, without pausing, careless even of punctuation, strong only in its own vehemence. Then suddenly it leaves me.[67]

Just as the first kind of 'compliant' writing is reflected in the depiction of Elena's orderly and elegant prose and her yearning for praise from peers and teachers, this second kind of 'impetuous' writing is clearly epitomised by Lila's disregard for stable literary and artistic forms and her eventual act of disappearance.

Indeed, Lila's prose, of which Elena is intensely jealous, reflects the unfixed quality of being-for-oneself: it is described by Elena as a series of 'hurried lines' which nevertheless contain a 'tempestuous world' which is itself *nauseating*, jumbled, but also tantalising and irresistible.[68] Her speech mirrors this writing style, in stark contrast with Elena's emphasis on precision:

> I felt all the fascination of the way Lila governed the imagination of others or set it free, at will, with just a few words: that speaking, stopping, letting images go without adding anything else. I'm wrong, I said to myself in confusion, to write as I've done until now, recording everything I know. I should write the way she speaks, leave abysses, construct bridges and not finish them, force the reader to establish the flow …[69]

Elsewhere, Ferrante makes clear her attraction to the elliptical and disjointed narrative rather than the closed narrative as the bearer of ultimate truth: 'the happy ending has to do with the tricks of the narrative, not with life, or even with love, which is an uncontrollable, changeable feeling, with nasty surprises that are alien to the happy ending.'[70] Nevertheless, in the interaction of the 'compliant' and the 'impetuous' within her, which mirrors the interaction of Elena and Lila's literary and non-literary modes of existence, Ferrante reveals that the act of writing is at its core a delicate interplay of truth and falsehood, authenticity and artifice. Just as Elena and Lila demonstrate their need for one another throughout their lives, Ferrante explains that the second kind of writing, which is unstable and fleeting, is reliant upon the first.[71]

It is here where Ferrante's account of authenticity and inauthenticity departs from Sartre's. Whereas for Sartre the state of freedom or 'being-

for-oneself' is the universal original position of human existence, for Ferrante it is 'being-for-others' that is the default ontological situation of all human existence as filtered through the geographically and temporally located lives of two women. Accordingly, while Sartre sees being-for-others as an inauthentic privation or 'fall' from one's natural state of authentic existence for-oneself, Ferrante's schema of the compliant and the impetuous have the opposite dynamic: the moments of authentic impetuous being-for-oneself are contingent upon/dependent on the default persistent condition of being-for-others. It is the compliant mode of being-for-others or compliance which makes possible the fleeting moments of authentic impetuous freedom.

In this regard, Ferrante's emphasis on the inescapability of compliance or 'being-for-others' is a feminist insight that is very much in continuation with Beauvoir's critique and revision of Sartre's account of freedom. Whereas Sartre's ontology entails that the human subject who naturally exists as 'for-oneself' would be necessarily responsible *for oneself* if one should ever fall into an inauthentic existence of compliance or 'being-for-others', as Sonia Kruks points out, 'for Beauvoir, although there are some women who comply with their oppressors in "bad faith", they are not the primary source of the problem.'[72] This is because, in Beauvoir's view, many women simply find themselves caught in positions of compliance or 'being-for-others' with no possibility of making free choices as they are trapped in situations that *men* inflict upon them.[73] Indeed, alongside Lila's experience of *smarginatura* as the collapse of stable material forms, Ferrante's introduction of the word *frantumaglia* in an early letter accounts specifically for the constraints on female subjectivity in its insistence that women, in the moments in which they are made aware of their oppression, are 'racked by contradictory sensations' which produce a psychological 'tearing' and threaten to annihilate the self.[74]

In the novels, this is communicated through the experience of Elena and Lila's childhood friend Gigliola Spagnuolo, who finds herself locked in a loveless and exploitative relationship with Michele Solara which drains her in body and soul, causing her to ask Elena 'Do you think I exist?'[75] In contrast to Gigliola, Lila and the pseudonymous Ferrante decline to be-for-others as a requirement of patriarchal womanhood and as an aspect of celebrity authorship. Yet it is of pivotal importance that this involves a renunciation of—or even a disappearance from—the world in order to create and protect 'a space of my own, a space that is free, where I feel active and present.'[76] Women's disappearance must be understood both as 'a clear rejection' where 'I'm not here, in this place, before what you're suggesting' and within a framework of the existential constraints placed upon them.[77] For women, Ferrante suggests, the margins of authenticity and inauthenticity are dissolved in their specific experience *as* women

such that the only true freedom is to physically remove oneself from the double bind.

Whereas Sartre argues that the human being exists either authentically for-oneself *or* inauthentically for-others, Beauvoir argues that human beings, and particularly women, cannot exist simply in the state of 'pure' being-for-oneself; rather, human existence is always 'a synthesis of freedom and constraint'—a position that is 'impossible within the framework of Sartrean ontology'.[78] Though one can certainly exist for-oneself for one moment of time and later 'lapse' or into a moment of being-for-others, one cannot be being-for-oneself *and* being-for-others at the same time. Unlike the mutually exclusive opposition Sartre posits between authentic being-for-oneself and inauthentic being-for-others, Ferrante notes that 'neither Elena nor Lila can ever definitively be locked within a formula that makes one the opposite of the other … I didn't feel that either Lila or Elena could be reduced to some sort of original model that would ensure her coherence'.[79] Rather both, like the *frantumaglia*, are a 'jumble of fragments', products of *smarginatura*'s 'sticky, jumbled reality'.[80]

In this regard, Ferrante, so to speak, 'dissolves' any neat boundary between being-for-oneself and being-for-others: like Beauvoir, and unlike Sartre, Ferrante holds that human existence can never be purely authentic but is instead always a 'synthesis' of freedom and constraint, authenticity and inauthenticity, impetuousness and compliance—or even Lila and Elena. Indeed, while Elena and Lila may be said to embody two kinds of writing experienced and practised by Ferrante, the author of the Neapolitan novels herself also suggests that readers of her tetralogy ought to be able to have the 'feeling that they are both Elena and Lila' and that Elena and Lila, just as these two modes of writing, embody their own contradictions, enabling Ferrante 'to set aside every literary idealization, every temptation to instruct'.[81]

Conclusion

Both 'Elena and Lila' are existential capacities within us, the moments we exist authentically like Lila's being-for-oneself are fleeting: they come and go and quickly disappear. For most of the time we largely exist like Elena's being-for-others, as Ferrante confirms in an interview: 'every "I" is largely made up of others and by the other … To live mean[s] to continually collide with the existence of others and to be collided with.'[82] Just as we come to know of Lila's life and story through Elena's recollection and orderly narration in the tetralogy, we mostly have access to our transient moments of authentic existence indirectly through retrospective reflection, not unlike how Ferrante speaks of her own writing practice as one which seeks to recollect and transform Lila-like moments of impetuous authentic

inspiration 'into neat narratives, orderly, harmonious, successful'.[83] Ferrante's nuanced depiction of authentic and inauthentic existence is both a thoroughly literary *and* thoroughly philosophical project, born of two of her greatest preoccupations: narrative and the human condition. Perhaps a final boundary which Elena Ferrante dissolves in her writing is that between literature and philosophy, between art and life, for she insists that writers, if they are to write *in good faith*, 'should construct fictions that help seek the truth of the human condition', even and especially where that means 'to delve truthfully into the darkest depth'.[84]

Notes

1. Elena Ferrante's tetralogy is translated by Ann Goldstein and published by Europa Editions (New York) in four volumes: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012); *The Story of a New Name* (2013); *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, (2014); *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015).
2. Barbara Alfano, 'The Fact of the Matter: Ethics and Materiality in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels', *Italian Quarterly*, 203–206 (2015), p. 27.
3. Sam Shpall, 'Female Freedom and *The Neapolitan Novels* (Part 1)', *Hypatia*, 36.4 (2021), p. 677.
4. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 56: 'Sexuality must not be taken as an irreducible given; the existent possesses a more primary "quest for being"; sexuality is only one of these aspects. Sartre demonstrates this in *Being and Nothingness*.'
5. *My Brilliant Friend*, p. 20.
6. Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2017), p. 222.
7. See Stiliana Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 27–60.
8. See *Frantumaglia*, pp. 103–5.
9. Ibid., p. 350.
10. *Those Who Leave*, p. 273.
11. Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2022), p. 15.
12. Olivia Santovetti, 'Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels', *MLR*, 113.3 (2018), p. 535.
13. Rebecca Walker, 'Picking Up the Pieces: Elena Ferrante's Global Poetics of Fracture', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), p. 77.
14. Tiziana de Rogatis, 'Global Perspectives, Trauma, and the Global Novel: Ferrante's Poetics between Storytelling, Uncanny Realism, and Dissolving Margins', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), p. 27.
15. See, for instance, Sam Shpall, 'Female Freedom and *The Neapolitan Novels* (Part 2)', *Hypatia* 37.1 (2022), pp. 111–135; Enrica Maria Ferrara, 'Grief and Posthuman Identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: The Precarious Life of Women and the Right to Disappear', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), pp. 96–117.
16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964).

17. *My Brilliant Friend*, pp. 176–77 [emphasis added].
18. *Lost Child*, pp. 175–76.
19. *My Brilliant Friend*, p. 176.
20. *Frantumaglia*, p. 242.
21. Ibid., p. 297.
22. *Nausea*, p. 134.
23. See also the account of the 'sticky' and 'slimy' character of human experience when it is overwhelmed by reality in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 624–36; cf. King-Ho Leung, 'Sartre and Marion on Intentionality and Phenomenality', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39.1 (2022), pp. 49–55.
24. *Nausea*, p. 129. Cf. Thomas Busch, '"*La Nausée*": A Lover's Quarrel with Husserl', *Research in Phenomenology*, 11.1 (1981), pp. 1–14.
25. *My Brilliant Friend*, p. 176.
26. *Nausea*, p. 125.
27. *Lost Child*, pp. 262–63.
28. Ibid., p. 455.
29. Most famously, Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946).
30. *Being and Nothingness*, p. 16.
31. See ibid., pp. 81, 89.
32. Lior Levy, 'Anguish and Bad Faith', in Matthew Eshleman and Constance Mui (eds.), *The Sartrean Mind* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 194.
33. *Being and Nothingness*, p. 82.
34. Ibid., p. 83; see Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 76.
35. Webber, p. 76.
36. See Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, pp. 61, 305: 'to play at being woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object … she must therefore renounce her autonomy [and be] treated as a living doll.'
37. For Sartre, 'being-for-others' is technically a necessary but not sufficient condition for 'bad faith'. However, for the purposes of this article, these two terms will be used interchangeably.
38. See *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 276–326, especially p. 306. Sartre's account of 'the gaze' is the root inspiration for many subsequent theoretical construals of the 'male gaze'; see Constance Mui, 'Intersubjectivity and "the Look"', Matthew Eshleman and Constance Mui (eds.), *Sartrean Mind* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 212–24; cf. Milkova, especially pp. 55–60, 109–114, 119–125.
39. *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 294–95.
40. Ibid., p. 83.
41. Ibid., pp. 294, 286 [Sartre's italics].
42. *Lost Child*, p. 179. Cf. Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, 'An Alternative Geometry: *L'amica geniale* and the *Bildungsroman*', *MLR*, 116 (2021), p. 453: 'I recognise the deep-rooted influence of Lila on Elena and her text, and argue that these chapters strengthen the undercurrent in the novel that constantly tends to turn Lila into an otherworldly figure (be it witch or patroness) from which Elena cannot be untangled.' Additionally, borrowing from Italian feminist theory, Ferrante has confirmed that Lila is for Elena a direct example of Adriana Cavarero's 'altra necessaria' (necessary other), whose presence

becomes the pre-requisite for the articulation of the 'narratable self'. See *In the Margins*, p. 55.

43. *Lost Child*, pp. 320–21.
44. Ibid., pp. 343–44.
45. Elizabeth Alsop, 'Femmes Fatales: "La fascinazione di morte" in Elena Ferrante's "L'amore molesto" and "I giorni dell'abbandono"', *Italica*, 91 (2014), p. 475.
46. *Lost Child*, p. 220, cf. p. 222: 'The words she had said to me at the end (*You're you, I have confidence*) also stayed with me for a long time. She died convinced that because of *how I was made* because of the resources I had accumulated, I would not be overwhelmed by anything' (emphasis added). Here Ferrante echoes Sartre's critical comparison of inauthentic human existence to inanimate objects which are *made* with a fixed and determined essence and meaning. See Sartre, *L'existentialisme*.
47. *Lost Child*, p. 371.
48. Cf. *Being and Nothingness*, p. 22, where Sartre describes inanimate being-in-itself in similar terms: 'Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is.'
49. Ibid., p. 21.
50. *Those Who Leave*, p. 36, where Nino continues: '[Lila is] really made badly: in her mind and in everything, even when it comes to sex.' Shpall suggests that this means that Lila is 'uninterested in submitting to the expected sexual regime of penetrative intercourse' and 'unwilling to submit to the expectations of her sex-based social roles' ('Female Freedom and *The Neapolitan Novels* (Part 2)', p. 117). Additionally, one might further argue that Lila is 'made badly' in the sense that she completely rejects any sense of pre-determined 'ready-made' essences which artificially '*made*' objects possess. See note 46 above.
51. *Lost Child*, p. 431.
52. Ibid. p. 471.
53. *New Name*, p. 205.
54. *My Brilliant Friend*, pp. 121–22.
55. *New Name*, p. 163.
56. *Lost Child*, p. 297.
57. Ibid., p. 315.
58. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.
59. *New Name*, p. 93.
60. *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 577, 633, 663, 683, 687, 718.
61. Tiziana de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante's Key Words*, trans. Will Schutt (London: Europa Editions, 2019), p. 59.
62. *Frantumaglia*, p. 357.
63. *Lost Child*, pp. 472–73.
64. See note 36 above.
65. *Lost Child*, p. 473.
66. *In the Margins*, pp. 28–29.
67. Ibid., p. 29.
68. *New Name*, pp. 401–2.
69. *Lost Child*, p. 169.
70. *Frantumaglia*, p. 241.
71. See *In the Margins*, p. 33: 'The first, the usual, contains the second. If I deprived myself of it, I wouldn't write at all.'

72. Sonia Kruks, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom', in William L. McBride (ed.), *Sartre's French Contemporaries and Enduring Influences* (New York: Routledge), p. 292.
73. See Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, especially p. 17.
74. *Frantumaglia*, p. 99. Though we have laid emphasis on the former, we acknowledge that *smarginatura* and *frantumaglia* go hand-in-hand, as Milkova rightly emphasises in *Ferrante as World Literature*, pp. 27–60. For Ferrante, the dissolving which *smarginatura* implies is a feminine mode of perceiving the world that underscores its fragility and that women's own existence is precarious.
75. *Those Who Leave*, p. 206.
76. *Frantumaglia*, p. 339.
77. Ibid., p. 237.
78. Kruks, 'Simone de Beauvoir', p. 293.
79. *Frantumaglia*, p. 358.
80. Ibid., p. 101; *Lost Child*, pp. 175–76.
81. *Frantumaglia*, pp. 277, 293.
82. Ibid., p. 365. Ferrante continues in the same interview: 'Our singularity, our uniqueness, our identity are continuously dying' (p. 368).
83. *In the Margins*, p. 37.
84. Elena Ferrante, *Incidental Inventions*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2019), p. 44; *Frantumaglia*, p. 350.

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