

# Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing

edited by

Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi





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# Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing

*edited by*

*Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi*



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In copertina | *Cover image: Cover image by Franca Rovigatti, La Dura Madre, 2003 [Dura Mater]*

*To the women writers  
discussed in this book,  
To their female protagonists  
– real even when fictional –  
and to their narratives of trauma.*





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## 12. Mean Girls and Melancholics: Insidious Trauma in *The Lying Life of Adults* by Elena Ferrante and *Conversations with Friends* by Sally Rooney

Rebecca Walker

### Abstract

This chapter expands a discussion of insidious trauma in Elena Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) in a cross-cultural direction. It offers a comparative reading of unlikable women in Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults* (2020) and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). It is argued that a feminist understanding of emotional trauma (BROWN: 2004) and the meanness and melancholy of female characters are closely linked in contemporary women's writing across borders, where a complex relation between agency and masochism is unfolded. Foregrounding the ambivalence of the traumatized female subject in the texts, it is argued that Ferrante and Rooney's confrontation of what is gained and what is lost by the performance of female unlikability places them as astute commentators on the traumas of everyday life.

Il presente capitolo contribuisce ad una discussione del trauma «insidioso» all'interno delle opere di Elena Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) con uno sguardo interculturale. Si offre una lettura comparativa della donna «spiacevole» ne *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019) di Ferrante e *Conversations with Friends* (2017) di Sally Rooney. Si sostiene che una discussione femminista del trauma emotivo (BROWN: 2004) si possa intrecciare con la meschinità e malinconia di personaggi femminili nella scrittura femminile contemporanea, all'interno della quale si sviluppa una relazione tra l'agire femminile e il masochismo. Puntando sull'ambivalenza del soggetto femminile traumatizzato, si afferma che Ferrante e Rooney, nell'affrontare i successi e i punti deboli della spiacevolezza femminile, rivelano di essere abili commentatrici dei traumi della vita quotidiana.

Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask  
of the disappointed and betrayed heart.  
bell hooks, *All About Love*, 18

Italian and Irish writers Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney, avowed admirers of one another's work, are bestsellers whose novels about women's lives and relationships have gained global traction. Ferrante's writing, spanning three decades, explores the difficulty of articulating a female subjectivity in a society which precludes women's flourishing; Rooney's three novels address the emotional lives of a generation of young women whose circumstances are relatively comfortable, but who nevertheless suffer intensely in their inner psychology and in relationships. In both writers' work, female characters are traumatized by feeling devalued or unseen, and respond by progressively harnessing the power of the bad, the ugly, and the false to restore something of their dignity and preserve themselves from further harm. In the present chapter, I expand a discussion of cumulative trauma in Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) in a cross-cultural direction by offering a comparative reading of the figure of the unlikable woman in Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults* (*La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, 2019) and Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). Paying attention to the «relational and process components of trauma» (BROWN: 2004, 465-466) resulting from inhabiting a repressively bounded subject position in Ferrante and from dysfunctional relationships with self and other in Rooney, I argue that a feminist understanding of trauma and the meanness or melancholy of female characters are closely linked in contemporary women's writing across borders.

*La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019c), translated by Ann Goldstein as *The Lying Life of Adults* in 2020, follows the middle-class teenager Giovanna Trada, between the ages of twelve and sixteen. Raised in the well-to-do Neapolitan neighborhood of Rione Alto, Giovanna's life changes when she overhears her beloved father describing her as «facendo la faccia di Vittoria» (2019c, 11) («getting the face of Vittoria»; 2020a, 13), taking on the appearance of his estranged sister in whom «combaciavano alla perfezione la bruttezza e la malvagità» (2019c, 12) («ugliness and spite were combined to perfection»; 2020a, 14). Insisting that she must meet Vittoria and see the resemblance for herself, Giovanna discovers by degrees that the adults around her are liars with shallow and selfish motivations, and that she must make her

own way in the world. In *Conversations with Friends*, Sally Rooney's debut novel, she presents the fraught inner life of Frances, a twenty-something, queer, left-wing humanities student at Trinity College Dublin who writes poetry, reads critical theory, and regards the world through a deconstructivist lens. Frances is at times highly reactive and at others supremely passive, and is consistently self-loathing. The novel charts her affair with a married man, Nick, and the emotional distress which this provokes. Frances' cruelty to others – but, above all, to herself – provides a literary exploration of the traumatic impact of parental and romantic bonds upon self-formation.

The narrative voice in these novels oscillates between pain and petulance, melancholy and meanness. In the alternation of these characteristics, Frances and Giovanna can be read as examples of the emerging post-feminist figure of the «unlikable woman». As recently as 2020 a study of workplace interactions concluded that likability as a quality is still affected by a gendered imbalance: «men react to likability only when they interact with women; if men interact with men, they don't care» (GERHARDS AND KOSFELD: 2020, 716). Female unlikability remains subversive, refusing the double standard of a requirement to be pleasing to men which most men do not, apparently, require of one another. Parsing the increase in negative forms of femininity in contemporary cultural production, Rebecca Liu (2019) sums up this trend as follows: «We are now supposedly in the era of the “unlikeable woman”, which means that we celebrate that women too can be dirty, repulsive, mean, cruel, and flawed». This is a «victory» (it shows that women are appropriating the right to say they, too, don't care) and yet Liu insists that we are also at risk of a «premature celebration» and «a divestment of power». She remarks that «[i]t is rarely asked to whom these women are cruel, what engineered this cruelty, and what ends this cruelty serves». Try as they might, she argues, the unorthodox female characters who populate our screens and libraries, from Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Sally Rooney's narrators, are always on a rocky road to self-determination which «re-routes towards melancholic self-destruction» (LIU: 2019). The present reading of Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney follows a similar path, preserving the power and the pitfalls of unlikability as it surfaces in contemporary narratives of female subjectivity where a complex relation between agency and masochism is unfolded.

The reasons for which women are cruel to themselves and others are a central preoccupation for Ferrante and Rooney. In their novels, the emotional traumas which lead women to negative thoughts, words, and actions distinguish themselves from psychoanalytic theories, elaborated in literary studies in Cathy Caruth's influential study from 1996, of a singular traumatic event which shatters the ego, fragments consciousness, and must be narratively re-elaborated in order to be defused. In a later study, Adriana Cavarero (2008) coins the term «horrorism» to conceptualize the disfiguration and dehumanization which have often been the basis for an understanding of trauma as an effect of war, genocide, and other forms of grotesque violence. Here, the typology of trauma at work is primarily *insidious*, borrowing from a framework developed by feminist psychologists including Laura Brown and Maria Root which accounts for «the banal cruelties to which they [traumatized individuals] have been subjected by people whom they loved and trusted» (BROWN: 2004, 469). Indeed, in words about Ferrante which also ring true for Rooney, Tiziana de Rogatis observes how «the constituent parts of our 'I' are found in the cracks produced by the ordinary traumas of our relationships» (2019, 43). The words and actions of others, not simply extremes of violence, have a tangible, *traumatic* impact on how we view ourselves and our bodies, re-shaping the relationship between the individual and her world.

Sara Ahmed further insists that «the histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile» (2017, 162), acknowledging that these histories are not always cataclysmic singular events that change the course of a life, but also a gradual wearing down of strength and diminishing of joy for those who are marginalized or feel oppressed. In Maria Root's understanding, a pluralistic vision of trauma such as this comprises «traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to soul and spirit» (1995, 107). Without diminishing the severity of more grievous forms of gender-differentiated or other violence, such a distinction allows us to view emotional weariness or woundedness as an experience which has a profound impact on the sufferer's self-image. It also allows us to address what Emanuela Caffè, discussing Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, calls a «complex and social, rather than biological, problem» (2021, 33), which is drawn out in the present discussion through a reading of negative femininity as a trauma response in recent literary texts.

I begin with a discussion of the power associated with adopted unlikability as a mode of approaching the world in *The Lying Life of Adults*. Here, the performance of female unlikability rejects an image of ideal femininity associated with goodness, beauty, and intelligence, and leans into the uglier parts of the self as a mode of responding to a paternally mediated shattering of the narrator's identity. Following this, I explore the open-ended nature of destructive behavior towards self and other as it appears in *Conversations with Friends*, where unlikability is engaged as a mechanism of emotional self-preservation, but nevertheless fails to facilitate the genuine human connection for which the protagonist longs. Lastly, I reiterate the ambivalence of the traumatized female subject in the texts, arguing that, without discounting the power of performances which upend received narratives of femininity, Ferrante's and Rooney's confrontation of both what is gained and lost by the performance of unlikability places them as astute commentators on the challenges of human relationships and the traumas of everyday life.

### Defacing patriarchy in *The Lying Life of Adults*

The narrator of *The Lying Life of Adults* reminds us of a feminine heritage of sadness and inhibition in the patriarchal setting of Naples: her mother's «lunga depressione» (2019c, 21) («long depression»; 2020a, 23) and loss of a sense of independent selfhood after childbirth, which inhibited the progression of her career. Nella, the mother, is subject to *frantumaglia*, the word in Ferrante's «feminine imaginary» (MILKOVA: 2021) which she employs neologically to describe the «dolorosissima angoscia» (FERRANTE: 2016a, 95) («excruciating anguish»; 2016b, 100) of women when faced with traumatic events such as abandonment or bereavement, and when made aware in discrete instances of their oppression. As Emanuela Caffè (2021) and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi (2021) remind us, Elena Ferrante's novels represent both singular highly traumatic events and a progressive traumatization of female characters who are subject to heartbreak and disillusionment.

There is, moreover, a precedent in Ferrante's writing for female badness. In the Neapolitan Novels, which begin in a poverty and crime-stricken suburb of Naples in the 1950s, Lila Cerullo's supposed malevolence is localized in her refusal to be defined by the dictates

of a father who forbids her education and a husband who desires her body but not her consent. When neither can break her, and when she fails to fall pregnant and fulfil the feminine biological destiny of the neighborhood, she is consigned as a bad daughter and a bad wife. In her husband's framing, Lila becomes «malefic[a]» (FERRANTE: 2012b, 86) («maleficent»; 2013, 86), one who was «nata storta» (2012b, 21) («born twisted»; 2013, 21). She is an emblem of how, in a context of marginalization (for Lila the intersection of gender and social class), «emotionally and psychologically wounded individuals» are sometimes «blamed for their experiences and subsequent symptomatology» (ROOT: 1992, 323). The meanness assigned to Lila by men who erase her trauma is later weaponized to destabilize those same patriarchal presences, but also remains an effect of the traumas of a curtailed education and a violent marriage. Lila, more than any other character, realizes that «c'è una miseria in giro che ci rende tutti cattivi» (FERRANTE: 2011, 257) («There is a poverty which makes us all cruel»; 2012a, 261) – that violence is socially conditioned. In *The Lying Life*, set in the 1990s, Ferrante expands upon what Lila and her friend Elena gradually discover: that wealth and education do not preclude suffering, but redefine it. Giovanna and her friends are well-off, secular, educated, and are told «che bisognava sentirsi orgogliose di essere nate femmine» (2019c, 23) («that we should be proud of being born female»; 2020a, 25). Yet the novel exposes how this is not linked to real belief on the part of these families in the emancipation of women, but rather one facet of a curated progressive identity which privileges word over action. Naples remains, as it did in the Neapolitan Novels, a «città senza amore» (2011, 184) («city without love»; FERRANTE: 2012a, 188) in which women remain disproportionately affected by lovelessness which, bell hooks points out, is not purely «a function of poverty or material lack» (HOOKS: 2018, 55). The non-structural trauma of the novel shows violence and affective suffering as ubiquitous, and exposes how those boundaries, class among them, which serve as supports for self-construction are flimsy.

Giovanna's choice to become vulgar and unbiddable responds to this knowledge and to her own *frantumaglia*: the fracturing of her self-image at the hands of her father and the subsequent loss of her ability to tell a cohesive, happy story about her life. In response to this breakdown, Giovanna's performance of unorthodox, iconoclastic femininity is intended to free her from an insidious patriarchal web,



at the centre of which lurks the Father, human or divine. At the novel's opening, Giovanna is «in un periodo di grande fragilità» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 12) («going through a period of feeling very fragile»; 2020a, 14), experiencing puberty as a disorientation and performing poorly in school. She is vulnerable to the emotional withdrawal of her parents, «un uomo straordinario» and «una donna assai gentile» (2019c, 22) («an extraordinary man» and «a really nice woman»; 2020a, 24) whose wealth, apparent joy, and attractiveness is supposed to guarantee her own. The decisive snap produced by the father's comparison of his daughter to the «sagoma secca e spiritata» (2019c, 13) («demonic silhouette»; 2020a, 15) of his estranged sister opens up a «vuoto dolorosissimo» (2019c, 36) («painful void»; 2020a, 38) and is figured as a simultaneous corporeal and temporal rupture: «si spezzò in quel momento qualcosa in qualche parte del mio corpo, forse dovrei collocare lì la fine dell'infanzia» (2019c, 36) («something somewhere in my body broke, maybe that's where I should locate the end of my childhood»; 2020a, 38). Like a revelation from God, the apparently irrefutable paternal pronouncement marks a before and an after, exiling Giovanna from the aesthetically pleasing, pliant, and articulate femininity, embodied by her mother and family friend Costanza, which carries currency in the cultivated world of her parents. As Sara Ahmed writes: «What happens when we are knocked off course [...] can be traumatic, registered as the loss of a desired future» (AHMED: 2017, 47). Giovanna is left to obsess over the biological fatalism of «il mio stesso futuro di femmina brutta e perfida» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 37) («my own future as an ugly, faithless woman»; 2020a, 39). The disobedient body, refusing to be pretty, thus becomes a «corpo avvilito» (2019c, 60) («depressed body»; 2020a, 62). The disobedient mind, refusing to perform well academically, instead allows that «cattivi sentimenti mi si allungavano per le vene» (2019c, 27) («bad feelings» course «through my veins»; 2020a, 30) like a noxious liquid. With monstrous images of Vittoria filling her imagination, Giovanna, failing to take on the elegant form which she had assumed would one day be hers, states: «mi sentivo sempre più mal fatta» (2019c, 28) («I felt deformed»; 2020a, 30).

As well as an effect of adolescence, which Ferrante describes in a 2020 interview as a time in which nothing seems «to possess the right form for you» (*The Elena Ferrante Interview*; 2020b), the narrator's sense of herself as deformed is mediated through a paternal mythology in

which he takes control of the narrative of the women around him, positioning Giovanna as a failure and Vittoria as a malevolent «aunt-witch» (2020a, 132) to be feared and despised, a receptacle for hatred of the past he has repudiated. It is significant that the deformity with which Giovanna becomes obsessed in the novel's opening chapters is the *imagined* one of a person she has never met: what it means to «get the face of Vittoria» is not clear to her, since Vittoria «in tutto il suo orrore» (2019c, 21) («in all her horror»; 2020a, 23) is *faceless*. Her face has been scored out of family photographs, leaving Andrea Trada free to cast her as the possessor of a «disgustosa scompostezza» (2019c, 17) («repulsive unseemliness»; 2020a, 19) which is an offense to proper feminine form and behavior. Vittoria is «la sorella cancellata di mio padre» (2019c, 20) («the sister my father had obliterated»; 2020a, 22). His explicit comparison of this excised woman with Giovanna makes of his daughter another of his «cancellature» (2019c, 19) («deletions»; 2020, 21) in «an insidious form of erasure as domination» (MILKOVA: 2021, 169). Indeed, so entwined is any remaining representation of Vittoria with the violent handiwork of her brother that «dove una volta ci doveva essere stata la testa di Vittoria fu una macchiolina che non si capiva se fosse un residuo di pennarello o un po' delle sue labbra» (2019c, 20) («Where once Vittoria's head must have been was a spot, and you couldn't tell if it was the residue of the pen or a trace of her lips»; 2020a, 22). Though the mutilated image of Vittoria remains «un corpo evidentemente femminile» (2019c, 19) («an evidently female body»; 2020a, 21), it has been literally defaced, removing any trace of the uniquely human. Perturbed by these violent marks, Giovanna fears that she too will be scrubbed from the narrative, becoming the faceless residue of a malicious paternal pen.

Olivia Santovetti confirms the novel as one which is «staging the trauma of separation» (2021, 3) proper to all coming-of-age narratives. Santovetti also explains, however, that Giovanna is not necessarily growing uglier, but growing *up*, ceasing for her mother and father to be «an extension of themselves which they can shape, dress, exhibit, and make plans about» (3), and passing into the stage of life when she will hone faculties for critical thinking. From Vittoria, who is not considered «una donna presentabile» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 101) («a presentable woman; 2020a, 103), Giovanna learns to look beyond the superficiality of a pleasant appearance. The aunt-witch refuses every requirement for the sort of womanhood her brother has presented as acceptable,

embracing a vulgar, profane, irreverent, and overtly sexual femininity. Vittoria is altogether «arcigna» (2019c, 51) («grim»; 2020a, 53), echoing the description of Giovanna with this word by family friend Mariano. As Mariano explains, attempting to lessen the blow, «Arcigna non è un insulto, è la manifestazione di uno stato d'animo» (2019c, 25) («Grim isn't an insult, it's the manifestation of a state of mind»; 2020a, 27). Indeed, the visual grimness of unhappy faces confirms how «[a]n affective disposition can speak for you, on your behalf» (AHMED: 2017, 53). In keeping Vittoria faceless and in insisting that in his own house negative emotions be suppressed in order to *save face*, Giovanna's father also conveniently elides the «rammarico, avversione, rabbia, malinconia» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 53) («remorse, aversion, rage, melancholy»; 2020a, 55) which render women's grimness an indictment of his own actions.

In Brown's exposition, insidious trauma produces in the subject «a capacity to think critically about dominant culture», and a «specific resilience» which comes from «lessons from family or culture» (BROWN: 2004, 466). Furthermore, for Sara Ahmed female unlikability and the grim female countenance carry political weight. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), she inaugurates the figure of the «feminist killjoy» as someone who is unwilling to ratify the status quo where it is perceived to be traumatic, declining to follow a pre-ordained cultural path to happiness and social success which is an existential dead-end (a single script for femininity, for example). Where «[f]eminist consciousness can be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power concealed under the languages of civility, happiness, and love, rather than simply or only consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility» (2017, 62), the killjoy's internal and external grimness is a revelation of false categories and violent narratives. Looking through new eyes, channelling the killjoy gaze of Vittoria who tells her that «[i] tuoi genitori t'hanno detto solo falsità» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 54) («Everything your parents told you is false»; 2020a, 56), Giovanna realizes that it is her father who is *defaced* when it is revealed that for decades he has been having an affair with Costanza, Mariano's wife. All are «fatti della stessa pasta» (2019c, 133) («made of the same clay»; 2020a, 133), then, and each face is ugly in its own way. Seeing brutality everywhere, Giovanna decides she will be brutal herself, engaging in a performance of unlikability which partially frees her from the tangled net of her upbringing and exposes the lying lives of others. Thus, she discovers that to reveal the true face of things, becoming a «sore point»

(AHMED: 2017, 159) which demands to be addressed, is one way to combat erasure.

Once Vittoria upends Giovanna's life, the unlikable woman is no longer the villain of the story but its driving force. Giovanna develops «una smania di sentirmi eroicamente turpe» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 163) («a yearning to feel heroically vile»; 2020a, 163), to be the protagonist of a story of desecration and destruction. She subverts the Trada family lexicon, uniting herself to «l'eventualità del male», which is synonymous with «quello che lui e mia madre nel loro gergo di coppia sostenevano di chiamare Vittoria» (2019c, 41) («the possibility of evil [...] what he and my mother in their couple's language claimed to call Vittoria»; 2020a, 42). Indeed, Vittoria approves of Giovanna and insists upon their similarity, reappropriating gendered insults as virtues in the description of her niece as «una puttarella intelligente come me» (2019c, 71) («an intelligent little slut like me»; 2020a, 73). Internalizing the dissenting voice of the aunt, Giovanna moves to mute her father altogether: «Andrea soprattutto, ah, tacesse» (2019c, 244) («Andrea especially, ah, let him be silent»; 2020a, 242). Referring to the father by his Christian name acts as a form of symbolic parricide, confirming the withdrawal of love and respect from this former giant who now «[m]i sembrò un ometto fragile» (2019c, 245) («seemed to me a small, frail man»; 2020a, 243). Accordingly, Giovanna decides that «parlavo come e quando mi pareva» (2019c, 168) («I would speak how and when I liked»; 2020a, 168), privileging her own perspective over the voices and narratives of others. In a particularly visceral scene, Giovanna, Ida, and Angela (Mario and Costanza's children) imagine defiling images of their parents. Angela declares she would spit on a picture of her mother; Giovanna declares she would urinate on a picture of her father; Ida declares she would write a story about it, preserving this collective iconoclasm in «sboccatezza» (2019c, 155) («foul language»; 2020a, 155). In the mooted defacing of her father's photograph, Giovanna delights in the untethered, self-actuating image that Ida's narrative will contain of «[q]uell'esiliarsi delle due sorelle nella loro stessa casa, quel recidere i legami si sangue» (2019c, 155) («two sisters exiling themselves in their own house», erasing «blood ties»; 2020a, 155).

In the same scene, Giovanna claims the right to self-identify, triumphantly, as a «troia» (2019c, 156) («whore»; 2020s, 157), chastizing her friends for their compliance with societal norms and expectations. From Giovanna's new position as observer, she comes to understand

that sex is the site at which a great deal of human ugliness is rendered visible. Indeed, in the sexual dynamics of the novel all lose face in view of the character of sex as something base and entirely animal, the point at which all identities collapse, especially those of loving father, loyal partner, and good friend. Even Roberto (the Christian theology student with whom Giovanna falls in love) and his girlfriend Giuliana, a new «extraordinary man» and «really nice woman», are not saved from sordidness by «la bellezza e l'intelligenza di chi ha la fede» (2019c, 110) («the beauty and intelligence of those who have faith»; 2020a, 114). The Gospels, too, have received Giovanna's iconoclastic treatment: God, figured as neglectful parent and merciless executioner, is to her more culpable even than a failed human father (2019c, 199; 2020a, 198). Moreover, Roberto's devotion to this other Father, whom Giovanna spurns alongside her biological one, has not rescued him from the passions of the flesh nor made him unwilling to betray Giuliana.

What Roberto reveals himself as willing to give Giovanna prompts a further shattering of hopes: not the respect she craves, but his body, reducing her, like Giuliana and her own mother, to a depersonalized «animalina graziosa o addirittura molto bella con cui un maschio di grandi pensieri può distrarsi giocando un po'» (2019c, 305) («small animal with whom a brilliant male can play a little and distract himself»; 2020a, 302). The stark closing scene in which Giovanna gives her virginity not to Roberto but to the lecherous Rosario is thus a corporeal realization of what she has come to accept about the unpalatable character of life and relationships. Moreover, it is an explicit betrayal of Vittoria, who, like all adults, has revealed herself to be a charlatan, and who insists on a link between sexual purity and young women's worth, telling Giovanna that if she is not wise in bestowing herself «non vai da nessuna parte» (2019c, 317) («you'll go nowhere»; 2020a, 313). Though not the faceless monster Giovanna once imagined, Vittoria is nevertheless *monstrous*: she has cannibalized the children of Enzo, her dead lover, and dominated his widow, living out of a well of «odio che ti fa campare anche quando non vuoi campare più» (2019c, 71) («hate that makes you go on even when you don't want to live any longer»; 2020a, 73). Giovanna's final act of self-determination scores through the fictitious sexual script given to her by this aunt, who declares: «Se tu questa cosa, in tutta la vita, non la fai come l'ho fatta io, con la passione con cui l'ho fatta, con l'amore con cui l'ho fatta [...] è inutile che campi» (2019c, 73) («If you, in all your life, don't do

this thing as I did it, with the passion I did it with, the love I did it with [...] it's pointless to live»; 2020a, 75).

Finally, Giovanna takes pleasure in the confirmation of the character of sex, like all human behavior, as «qualcosa di ripugnante e insieme ridicolo» (2019c, 94) («something revolting and at the same time ridiculous»; 2020a, 96). The same becomes true of faces, the source of so much soul-searching: «Quanto alla faccia, sì, non aveva nessuna armonia, proprio come Vittoria. Ma l'errore era stato farne una tragedia» (2019c, 260) («As for my face, it had no harmony, just like Vittoria's. But the mistake had been to make it a tragedy»; 2020a, 258). The novel's final *defacement* and greatest iconoclasm is that which destroys the patriarchal story of sex, a bodily activity which stands for the intersecting discourses of pleasure and pain, goodness and badness, beauty and ugliness which Giovanna has progressively deconstructed. In a novel peppered with revelations which mark traumatic before and afters, Giovanna's first time cannot be counted among their number. Rather, it becomes a mere «azione volgare» (2019c, 304) («vulgar act»; 2020a, 302), refusing a phallogocentric system of cause and effect in which the woman is changed by «un sesso pendulo o ritto» (2019c, 304) («a penis, limp or erect»; 2020a, 302). Throughout the scene, Giovanna unwrites the text which Rosario is trying to follow: he asks to kiss her, she refuses; he asks her to undress, she does not. For the «cosetto penzoloni tra le gambe» (2019c, 323) («little thingy dangling between his legs»; 2020a, 320) she reserves a sympathetic look. The sex itself is perfunctory and unsentimental, creating the «racconto femminile che, pur dicendo dettagliatamente del sesso, non sia afrodisiaco» (2019a, 34) («female story that, while its subject is sex, isn't aphrodisiac»; 2019b, 38) which Ferrante elsewhere calls for. «Era proprio così che lo volevo fare» (2019c, 325) («That was how I wanted to do it»; 2020a, 322) Giovanna tells Rosario, implying that this is the kind of sex which should be had, just as a grim expression is the best of faces. The (non-) event kills patriarchal joy and overturns established narratives about intimacy and pleasure, leaving «lui scontento, io allegra» (2019c, 326) («him dissatisfied, me delighted»; 2020a, 322). Most importantly, it does not seek to hide its essential lewdness, its readiness to destroy as well as create. Immediately following this, Giovanna and Ida board a train for Venice. She will indeed, then, in defiance of Vittoria and all who have sought to shatter her, go somewhere, believing nothing and no-one can stop her.

### The text of entanglement in *Conversations with Friends*

In Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, Nick gives Frances a script for their dysfunctional on-off relationship: «You say cryptic things I don't understand, I give inadequate responses, you laugh at me, and then we have sex» (ROONEY: 2017, 199). Though said in jest, the cycle is one which causes pain to both, and which is never fully broken. Rooney's primary preoccupation across her novels is with the fragility of relationships, the timing of encounters between individuals, and the power of words spoken too hastily or too late. Rooney, interviewer Emma Brockes tells us, is «more interested in the echo of trauma» than in representing trauma in the moment of its occurrence because, Rooney comments, «the aftermath is what so many of us experience as life itself» (2021). The ways in which we relate to one another bear the marks of how we have been and continue to be hurt. «It seems to me like almost everyone», Rooney continues «has endured some kind of pain or suffering that has changed their life. That change can take the form of "damage", or of learning and growth, or some combination of the two» (BROCKES: 2021). The result of these everyday traumas of human relationships is the persistent belief her narrators harbor that they do not deserve to have their emotional needs met by a parent or partner. Their instability spills out onto the page, upsetting the relationship with the self, the other, and the world. Rooney's is thus a phenomenological preoccupation with the ways in which people respond to forms of trauma reflexively in the present, set in a vision of capitalist contemporary culture in which consistency and decency are the rarest and most precious commodities of all.

As a literature student, Frances has already done the work of deconstructing the patriarchal script for women's lives. She has read the texts and attended the seminars, but is unable to live out of this theoretical knowledge. Though she flirts with the right feminist sore points, her grandiose declaration to Nick that «I wanted to destroy capitalism and [...] I considered masculinity personally oppressive» (ROONEY: 2017, 75) whilst working unpaid for a publishing house, holidaying at rich people's houses, and viewing herself primarily through the eyes of men to whom she is attracted reveal a Marxist feminism which is often as performative as her spoken word poetry gigs. Frances consults critical texts simply to be able to boast, commenting to herself whilst reading Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial*

*Reason* that «I'm going to become so smart that no one will understand me» (94). In social situations, she instrumentalizes gender for comedic benefit in low-stakes interactions which are not meaningful feminist interventions but an occasional party piece (75). As Madeleine Gray observes: «conversation becomes a performance piece in which Frances can be ascendent» (2020, 77) – it is the only area in which she feels in control of her life and dominant over men. If the novel contains a feminist killjoy, it is not Frances but Bobbi, the best friend and ex-girlfriend who reminds Frances of her «disloyalty and ideological spinelessness» (ROONEY: 2017, 63), that «you have to do more than say you're anti things» (180), and that her infatuation with Nick is «devaluing our friendship» (81). In contrast to Giovanna's destruction of the patriarchal face of Naples as a mirror of her own paternally mediated disintegration, Frances' conversational prowess is a grasp at power which often lapses into confirming her own powerlessness. It highlights instead the ways in which her sense of self continues to be tied to the need for «acclaim» (41), as well as what Orlaith Darling calls «her passivity in the face of a cannibalistic system, and her dependence on men» (2021, 541). Frances repudiates women's subjugation and pliant femininity in a rhetorical sense, but fails to fully transform this into the text of her life.

Alongside the weaknesses of Frances' feminism and the «petulant gesture» (ROONEY: 2017, 121) of her interpersonal interactions, she is subject to intense physical and emotional suffering. Indeed, this suffering is at the root of her unpleasantness, and can be read as a product of the cruelties of people whom she has «loved and trusted» (BROWN: 2004, 469). She is wary of her father, an alcoholic whose behavior communicates greater investment in his addiction than his child. As the narrative voice veers between the expression of acute pain and complete detachment, it is understood that this is the legacy of a child who had «learned not to display fear», opting to appear as an emotionless «cold fish» (ROONEY: 2017, 49) for self-preservation. Anxiety – which de Rogatis reminds us can itself be traumatogenic (2021, 7) – associated with Frances' father's unpredictability is projected onto images of her body as damaged or destroyed, a passive object detached from the self. In particular, the image of the face surfaces again as something which is removed, suggesting the dehumanizing effect on women of paternal failure which is common to Rooney and Ferrante. Remembering a past incident in which her father tossed one



of her school shoes into the fire during a drunken rage, Frances states that «I watched it smouldering like it was my own face smouldering» and that, given the chance, «I would have let my real face burn in the fire too» (ROONEY: 2017, 49).

As Giovanna does, Frances eventually responds to this trauma by rejecting her father, distressing her mother by talking about him as someone with whom she has no connection (176-177). She refers to him by his Christian name, and allows herself to wonder whether the kindness her mother expects of her towards him is a gendered expectation, «another term for submission in the face of conflict» (177). Nevertheless, the revelations about herself, rather than those about the condition of women (a topic on which Frances and Bobbi consider themselves experts) are those which prove most shattering. If Frances is a «leaky container» as Ahmed states of killjoys (2017, 171), it is past hurt and present pain, not righteous anger, which spill out of her as a cumulative effect of a life in which she is «playing a video game without knowing any of the controls» (ROONEY: 2017, 77). During a rupture with Nick which is a catalyst for negative self-reflection, she figures her body as «an empty glass», from which, along with his lost affection, have tumbled forth «all my delusional beliefs about my own value» (287).

Throughout the narrative, the body speaks in ways that Frances herself cannot, despite her articulacy. In moments of shock or distress, Frances traumatizes her own skin, expressing on the body the effect of unspoken words, deleted texts, and unfinished phone conversations. In her grief over Nick's undemonstrative attitude she pulls her hair out, picks her skin, and asks him to hurt her during sex. At the same time, she concludes that «I need to be fun and likeable», conceiving of the relationship's success as connected to her ability to be beautiful and witty regardless of what is going on behind the scenes (30). The awfulness she feels inside and projects onto acts of bodily cutting and pulling is more viscerally mirrored in her undiagnosed endometriosis, which erupts periodically in frightening episodes of excruciating pain, circumscribed by her tendency to self-censure. «Everybody suffers», she declares to Bobbi, pressing a scalding hot water bottle to her stomach (23). The worsening symptoms of this condition, which doctors initially fail to diagnose, are a symbol of the failure to take women's pain (of any sort) seriously, and a physical counterpart to the emotional lacerations by which Frances has been affected since

childhood. The masochistic part of her, indeed, sometimes welcomes bodily pain as a «psychologically appropriate» (84) companion to feelings of distress.

Frances is accustomed to attuning her behavior to her father's «moods», alternating between «humouring him and ignoring him» (49). With Nick, she inscribes herself willingly within a similar framework, shifting between engaging him and «writing only terse responses to his messages, or not responding at all» (83). The first time they have sex, she feels so overwhelmed that «I thought: I might never be able to speak again after this», and yet she «surrendered without a struggle» (71). The language of silencing is significant. Though the narrator is speaking of pleasure, Stephen Marche argues that sex in Sally Rooney's work is «only peripherally about pleasure or even lust; it is about articulating and achieving the correct position, in every sense» (2021). The sexual dynamic (in which Frances is submissive) is a mirror of the broader silencing effect which Nick's ambivalence unintentionally has on Frances as a young creative. When they are having communication difficulties, she finds herself swallowed up in self-loathing, unable to write, and in doubt of her identity. In response, she continues to subjugate herself, thinking of her body «like he owned it» (ROONEY: 2017, 205) and situating the violence she asks for as something she has merited as a «damaged person who deserved nothing» (214). Most significantly, Frances dictates the terms of this unequal dynamic. It is she who says «You can do whatever you want to me» whilst Nick refuses, asking for consent in sexual situations and declining to be forceful with her (213).

The blueprint for the relationship that Frances thinks she is following is one of calculated disinterestedness, yet it is she who is active and Nick passive. As Olga Cameron Cox notes (2020, 421), Rooney is striking in her portrayal of male passivity and its potential to damage the female characters who desire active confirmation of a partner's investment. In response to Nick's verbal inhibition, Frances latches onto a protective vision of herself as an unpleasant «plain and emotionally cold» woman (ROONEY: 2017, 83), facilitated by her offhand and confrontational mode of communicating online. In her online messages, she is acerbic, controlling the conversation in a manner not possible during face-to-face interactions, where Nick frequently disappoints her. Attempting to transpose the aloof online persona into real-life exchanges, she assures Nick when they resume

their affair that «we can sleep together if you want, but you should know I'm only doing it ironically» (114). As in *The Lying Life*, sex is the scene of an elaborate power play: detaching from it, insisting that it is «just sex» (79) are techniques to keep a partner guessing and to avoid forming a risky attachment. Sex is also, however, a site at which craving for connection and reassurance emerges. Without the overt ugliness it possesses for Giovanna, sex is one of the few tools of unfiltered communication Rooney's highly articulate protagonists possess, and yet it is a dangerous tool, because it presents the possibility of speaking, bodily, something that is true but otherwise withheld. Frances discovers to her dismay that, for all her rhetorical posturing, the body keeps the score: «it was impossible now to act indifferent like I did in the emails» (71). More than this, that Frances is not sleeping with Nick ironically, as though it were another of her self-deprecating feminist jokes, and that the texts are just texts, constructions, is the source not of an agentic femininity but of further suffering.

Frances' adopted unlikability is a performance which makes it hard for others to engage with her on an equal footing because they «never have any idea how you feel about anything» (89). Yet unlike Giovanna and Rosario, rather than forcing Nick to follow a script that *she* is writing, the conversations and experiences which Frances herself has sabotaged leave her feeling «spiteful» (86), consumed by the pain of negative emotion where Giovanna is electrified by its power. Frances retains only surface control over the narrative of her emotional life by her practice of detachment: «although I could decide to fight with him, I couldn't decide what he would say or how much it would hurt me» (134). In fact, once laid bare before herself, Frances realizes she has severely underestimated her vulnerability to fresh affective traumas, and it is only after much lashing out and self-flagellation that she is willing to confront the extent of her «melancholic self-destruction» (LIU: 2019). Ultimately, the person to whom she is cruelest, whom she likes the least and whom she is most willing to abandon is herself, in a surrender of control which is also a refusal of responsibility and a lingering attachment to a false narrative. «You underestimate your own power so you don't have to blame yourself for treating other people badly», Bobbi tells her, «*You tell yourself stories about it. I can't hurt these people. If anything, they're out to hurt me and I'm defending myself*» (ROONEY: 2017, 302, emphasis mine).

## Mean girls and melancholics

In *The Lying Life of Adults* and *Conversations with Friends*, the narrators Frances and Giovanna engage in a performance which centers bad or ugly aspects of personality to expose the good and beautiful as empty signifiers (Giovanna), or to protect against the vulnerability of total self-exposure in ill-defined romantic relationships (Frances). Where past or present emotional suffering disrupts the ability to tell a coherent story about one's life, Giovanna and Frances try to tell new stories in which they feature as autonomous agents with the capacity to structure their relationships and personalities as they see fit. At the same time, both allow themselves to be used by others in ways which belie a continued desire for love and acceptance. Their unlikability is not simply a reaction to the expectations and the failings of others (a feminist response to an unjust world), but a product of progressively unfolding personal and interpersonal traumas. Speaking from a place of hurt, their wounds are cultural *and* personal, reflected narratively in the quality of their engagements with themselves and the world.

By the end, the narrators are not necessarily free or securely happy. The killjoy, indeed, is not promised joy. Within the theoretical framework of insidious trauma, space is left both for «unique coping strategies» and «unique vulnerabilities» in the lives of those affected (BROWN: 2004, 466). Frances and Giovanna are often convinced they are «incapable of any achievement» (FREUD: 2001, 246 [1916-1917g]) and that they and their bodies are «garbage» (ROONEY: 2017, 93). Alongside the meanness they manufacture, they fit the profile for a Freudian melancholic, which is to say one whose trauma is loss of self. For Freud, melancholia characterizes itself by

a profoundly painful dejection, a cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings... (2001, 244).

Giovanna's distress is propelled by the conviction that she is ugly and stupid and that her father's love — and, the novel suggests, women's value in a patriarchal culture — is contingent and conditional. She recounts how «Mi sento brutta, di cattivo carattere, e tuttavia vorrei essere amata» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 191) («I feel ugly, like I'm a bad person, and yet I'd like to be loved»; 2020a, 189). Frances worries that love must be earned,

and is motivated by a desire to fashion herself as «someone worthy of praise, worthy of love» (ROONEY: 2017, 41). This lack of self-esteem is not structurally informed, a social shift for which the contemporary trauma novel has sometimes come under fire (see ROSENFELD: 2019). Giovanna and Frances are broadly emancipated products of a middle-class post-feminism, remain largely untouched by material suffering, and might be justly critiqued for complacency and for a certain complicity in their own objectification. Nevertheless, their emotional experiences confirm that, even outside a context of explicit marginalization, «one of the prominent wounds of trauma is the crushing of the human spirit [...], which may indeed be the hardest wound to heal» (Root: 1992, 238).

The question of healing is therefore deliberately left open. If a link is to be drawn between female unlikability, trauma, and subversion, we might see Giovanna as freer than Frances. Regardless, this must be acknowledged as a bitter freedom. Indeed, de Rogatis has called *The Lying Life* Ferrante's most «bitter» novel to date (2020). Giovanna escapes with childhood friend Ida to Venice, resolving her relationship to Naples in flight. But if we know anything of Ferrante's novels, it is that neat conclusions are illusory: «Il lieto fine ha a che fare con i trucchi della narrativa, non con la vita e nemmeno con l'amore che è un sentimento ingovernabile, mutevole, pieno di brutte sorprese estranee all'happy ending» (FERRANTE: 2016a, 232).<sup>1</sup> In that suffering in Ferrante's work is navigated «senza approdi trascendenti» (2016a, 73) («without transcendent results»; 2016b, 78), Victor Zarzar reminds us that «alongside progress always lurks regress» (2020). Vittoria is no uglier than anyone else. In fact, Ferrante reveals, the face of Vittoria is the face of us all, except that Vittoria's peculiar blend of beauty and violence, like Naples, has «the merit of always having presented itself without a mask» (JACOB: 2018). Despite this, even Vittoria, unrefined and unrepentant, does not possess the truth—she merely has another story to tell, with different heroes and villains. One doubts whether wicked Vittoria has «tutta l'arte di strega che ci serve» (FERRANTE: 2021, 117) («the witchcraft we need»; 2022, 87) or is simply under the spell of self-delusion. Giovanna is forced to acknowledge that beneath it all «sarei stata pur sempre io, un'io malinconica, un'io sventurata, ma

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<sup>1</sup> «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» (2016b, 241).

io» (2019c, 42) («I would still be me, a melancholy me, an unfortunate me, but me»; 2020a, 44). She never completely resolves her sense of «lo sforzo insopportabile di esistere» (2019c, 201) («the unbearable effort of existing»; 2020a, 199), confessing from the outset her suspicion that she remains «un garbuglio» («a tangled knot»), and that any story she writes about herself will be reducible to «un dolore arruffato, senza redenzione» (2019c, 9) («a snarled confusion of suffering, without redemption»; 2020a, 11).

Like Giovanna's departure from Naples with another girl, Frances rekindles her romantic relationship with Bobbi, suggesting an eventual circumvention of the heterosexual frameworks by which both narrators have felt oppressed. However, she is also drawn inexorably back into what can only ever be a half-relationship with Nick. Without resolving the difficulties which led to the breakup, she tells him blithely that «[i]f two people make each other happy then it's working» (ROONEY: 2017, 320). There is no indication that the text of their entanglement will be written anew. Often, Nick and Frances' interactions are not really conversations in the sense of two people who see and understand one another; most of the people in the novel, battling for control of the text of their own and others' lives, struggle to be friends in the sense of bearing disinterested affection for one another. Frances' illusion of impermeability doesn't hold, and life becomes «the distracting tasks undertaken while the thing you are waiting for» – to feel whole and happy – «continues not to happen» (289).

Women's unlikability in these texts is not, then, a good (or an evil) in itself simply because it defies gendered expectations. It is rather what the unlikable personalities at the heart of these narratives stand for which is ethically inflected. Alongside feminist practices of redefining the contours of femininity, we might see female unlikability in contemporary literary texts which deal with emotional trauma as asking a broader question of how it is that we become or fail to become the people that we wish to be, acknowledging that this is in part governed by the sorts of suffering we have faced. Via disruptive moments in the life of her protagonists, Ferrante's ethical undertaking, Barbara Alfano states, is to «stir in the reader specific sensations that will lead them to choose between (what feels) good and (what feels) bad» (2018, 25). The power of Ferrante's writing is that the line between the two is disconcertingly blurred, defying those who insist «la protagonista di una storia deve essere simpatica, non deve avere

sentimenti orribili, non deve fare cose sgradevoli» (FERRANTE: 2019a, 40) («the protagonist of a story should be nice, shouldn't have terrible feelings, shouldn't do unpleasant things»; 2019b, 44).

Similarly, Sally Rooney shows how unlikability, avoidance of moral didacticism, and readerly empathy are drawn together in her fiction:

I certainly can't say I love these characters because of their likeable personality traits. [...] Many readers will doubtless find some or all of them "unlikeable." That's okay. I wasn't trying to create characters I approved of or looked up to – but equally I wasn't interested in writing about people I considered morally beneath me. [...] I believe that, while not everyone is "likeable", everyone is loveable. Part of what motivates me as a novelist is the challenge implicit in this belief. I want to depict my characters with enough complexity, and enough depth of feeling, that a reader can find a way to love them without liking them. Or even like and love them despite everything – as I do. (LYSTER: 2021).

It is clear that Frances and Giovanna elect to become unlikable because they feel *unlovable*. The progression from apparently unlovable to deliberately unlikable is insidious: the cumulative result of the ways in which others have shown disregard for the narrators' full humanity, creating a «cynicism» that comes from the «pervasive feeling that love cannot be found» (HOOKS: 2018, 18). In other words, likability and unlikability do not here flow from some corresponding source of inner goodness or badness, but are culturally and, I have argued, traumatically informed.

As we accompany Giovanna and Frances in their successes and failures, one issue which their attempts to re-write the script of their engagement with themselves and others raises is how the cultural and individual texts that we are reading from can trap us, and how we can trap ourselves in them. For some, unlikable women are feminist killjoys, meaning that they refuse to be happy in the ways their society expects of them, disrupting dominant cultural narratives. On the flipside, there are those who ask what we gain from «young female protagonists [who] insist on their agency – even if it's the agency to seek out their own debasement» (ROSENFELD: 2019). If the unlikability of female characters is partly a response to emotional experiences which are felt to fragment identity and restrict possibility, then a faithful reading of these novels makes room for an intermingling of resistance with regress. Indeed, the framework for insidious trauma

as applied to Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney is properly feminist in that it invites us to ask the difficult question of why someone might feel the need to become untouchable in the first place. Asking this question, we are led to consider meanness, melancholy, and the pain of the disappointed heart as intertwined, and are invited to empathize with the sometimes frustrating, even unsympathetic voices of female characters who meld self-creation with self-destruction. Answering it, we are invited to do something yet more transgressive: to «like and love them despite everything», Rooney nudges us, «as I do».

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## Biography

REBECCA WALKER is an MHRA Research Scholar in the Modern European Languages at the University of St Andrews. She obtained her PhD in Italian from St Andrews with a thesis on fragmented identity in the works of Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante. Her ongoing research is focused on twentieth- and twenty-first-century women's writing across languages, with a particular interest in how ethical questions are treated in contemporary narratives of female subjectivity.

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