

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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## ***My Brilliant Friend: Elena Ferrante on Class, Capital, and Language***

Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (*L'amica geniale*, 2011) opens with a brief prologue, from the perspective of an Italian woman in her sixties who learns that an old friend has vanished, taking with her all her personal possessions and even cutting her image out of family photographs, to fulfil a long-held promise or threat to "disappear without leaving a trace" (20). But "she was expanding the concept of trace out of all proportion," the narrator tells us: "I was really angry. / We'll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write—all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory" (23). And so the tale unfolds, framed as a revenge narrative, or as proof that the past stubbornly endures and cannot be so easily eliminated. Indeed, in what follows, a central theme is the difficulty of escaping one's destiny, shaped as it is not only by the past but also by place, and by class and gender. It is language, however, that emerges as a particularly significant battleground, and the question is posed as to whether it is enough simply to invert the hierarchies that condemn the dominated at best to accept and even love their hate. Maybe disappearance, dissolving all margins, fleeing the realm of representation, is the only strategy that remains.

### *1. Acquiring a Taste for Domination*

Elena Greco, our narrator, and Lina, or Lila, Cerullo, her friend, meet as young girls in a rough working-class neighbourhood in Naples back in the 1950s. Elena's father is a porter at city hall; Lila's is a shoemaker. We soon meet a whole cast of other characters—the grocer's family, the carpenter's family, the owners of the local café/bar—with a focus on the kids who hang out on the same streets, go to the same primary school, and in time become friends, enemies, allies, rivals, and even (as the narrative continues) workmates, partners, and lovers. The neighbourhood is isolated and self-contained: Naples is a port city, but neither Elena nor Lila have seen the sea. For most of its inhabitants, the height of their ambitions, as post-war consumer culture takes hold, is to buy a car, a TV set, perhaps a telephone.

But there is from the outset the sense that Elena and Lila are special, and that Lila in particular is exceptional. Lila is headstrong and tenacious, determined to carve out her own path: "Although she was fragile in appearance, every prohibition lost substance in her presence. She knew how to go beyond the limit without ever truly suffering the

consequences. In the end people gave in, and were even, however unwillingly, compelled to praise her" (64). Lila is also "brilliant" in that she is intellectually precocious: at three, she has already taught herself to read, probably from the newspapers in which her father's customers wrap their old shoes. Later, she applies for library cards for her entire family and with them borrows (and devours) four books at a time every week, such that her illiterate mother comes to seem one of the library's most dedicated patrons. Elena, for her part, is inspired and provoked by Lila's exploits: much of the book is an account of her efforts to keep up with her friend. Where Lila leads, Elena is keen to follow. If anyone can find a way out of the poverty and violence that surrounds them, it is surely Lila, and Elena plans to hang on her coat-tails and come along for the ride.

Yet, as time goes by, the girls' roles start to reverse, at first imperceptibly but by the end definitively as Lila drops out of school and then, aged sixteen, marries the grocer's son—a successful match in her neighbours' eyes, but hardly the fiery escape from her environment that her earlier trajectory had promised. The day of the wedding, she urges the narrator to keep on studying. "At a certain point school is over," Elena replies. "Not for you," Lila says, "you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls" (312). This line prompts a shock: that almost at the end of the book, the only time its title phrase is invoked, it should apply to Elena and not Lila. What has happened? We remember that the prologue had placed the older Elena in Turin, with Lila last seen still in Naples. How did the one manage to get out, and not the other, not least when Lila seemed most likely to overcome the barriers in her way? What holds Lila back, and what allows (or drives) Elena to flee? Pause the video, and write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a glass of a cheap red wine, but I'll be right back.

Wine, perhaps more than any other drink, offers a whole field of social differentiation. There is good wine and bad, expensive and cheap, though quality does not always correlate with price, and so most important of all is the sense of taste (both corporeal and social) required to discern the right wine, for the right occasion. At Lila's wedding, these distinctions are played out too openly, in a gauche failure of sophistication, a betrayal of the mandate to present taste as natural and innate: "the more rancorous guests [. . .] notice the things that weren't right" when they see that "the wine wasn't the same quality for all the tables" (323). The ensuing discontent reveals the "reality behind the appearance of

festivity. [...] They had spent their last cent for the gift, for what they were wearing, had gone into debt, and now they were treated like poor relations, with bad wine, intolerable delays in service?" (326). A wedding is to be a space of exception, in which economic calculation is briefly suspended in carnivalesque celebration, but the scale of the sacrifice required is such that it is difficult to maintain that fiction of disinterested generosity. Not least when the wine you are served is worse than your neighbour's.

School promises to offer the most likely ladder out of the neighbourhood, but Lila's parents are resistant to her continuing with her education. While Elena's parents are persuaded of the value of middle school, despite the sacrifices of time and money required, Lila's father says no, telling her brother in a refusal inflected by gender: "Why should your sister, who is a girl, go to school?" (69). In a fight not long afterwards, her father breaks Lila's arm: "He had thrown her like a thing" (82). She then goes to some kind of secretarial college for a while, but fails, claiming afterwards: "I failed on purpose. I don't want to go to any school any more." Elena asks: "What will you do?" To which Lila responds: "Whatever I want" (95). Yet, constrained by a lack of both money and education (financial and cultural capital), she and her friends are left only with different versions of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "the choice of the necessary" and its associated "taste for the necessary which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary, a resignation to the inevitable" (*Distinction* 372). *The best they can do, it seems, is embrace their fate, fight for their own servitude.*

When, once, Lila, Elena, and some others leave the neighbourhood for a night out, they find that they are invisible to their middle-class counterparts: "They didn't see any of the five of us. We were not perceptible. Or not interesting" (192). Defensively laughing at the fashions and tastes of those around them, these working-class kids on the town finally do call attention to themselves, and a scuffle breaks out: "Our laughter abruptly turned to fear." As she drags her brother from the violence, Lila has "an expression of disbelief, as if a thousand fragments of our life, from childhood to this, our fourteenth year, were composing an image that was finally clear, yet which at that moment seemed to her incredible" (194). Their entire education, formal and informal, is a matter of learning their place. You can conform by resisting, as Lila often does, or by betraying your friends and family, as Elena does, at least internally, when at the book's end and at the height of her

friend's wedding festivities, she suddenly sees her environment through her teachers' eyes: "The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who should be served first and better, that dirty floor on which the waiters clattered back and forth, those increasingly vulgar toasts. [. . .] They were all laughing, even Lila, with the expression of one who has a role and will play it to the utmost" (329). *My Brilliant Friend* suggests that the only real choice is whether to internalize class domination or to reject class belonging by seeing the world from the perspective of the dominant. Either way, you lose!

## 2. *Mobilizing the Politics of Language*

In Ferrante's novel, there is no clearer marker of class distinction than language. The narrator consistently notes when characters speak in standard Italian, the national language and a sign of both education and cultivation, as opposed to the Neapolitan dialect spoken (in fact not just in Naples, but across much of Southern Italy) mostly in the home or on the street. Many of the older generation have only a partial grasp of Italian: Elena's mother, for instance, summoned to meet her daughter's teacher, speaks in "dialect bent into an ungrammatical Italian" (93). By contrast, at one of the many points at which Elena tries to establish a claim on Lila—here as she feels threatened by a mutual friend in a competition for her affections—and aims to show that she is not like the other kids, she comes out "unexpectedly in proper Italian, to make an impression, to let her understand that, even if I spent my time talking about boyfriends, I wasn't to be treated like Carmela." Elena and Lila then re-establish the exclusivity of their friendship, in part by revelling in and showing off their mutual fluency in the official language, "reduc[ing] Carmela to pure and simple listener. These moments lighted my heart and my head: she and I and all those well-crafted words" (103). Italian here is quite literally a code, a password to inclusion that works by shutting others out.

However arbitrary the difference between official language and local patois—standard Italian is after all merely the Tuscan dialect raised to the status of national tongue—the distinction is very viscerally felt and reproduced. The choice of language, for those (like Elena and Lila) with the facility to switch between the two, not only shapes the speaker but also, it seems, determines what can be said. Dialect in the novel is repeatedly associated with insults and violence, while Italian is the medium for discussion of loftier, more academic topics.





Naples street scene in 1956

This linguistic hierarchy is, however, up for dispute. Late on in the book, Elena wants to discuss literature and theology with a schoolmate, but complains that “while in school he used a good Italian; when it was just the two of us he never abandoned dialect, and in dialect it was hard to discuss the corruption of earthly justice [. . .] or the relations between God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus” (259-60). Turning then to Lila (“I needed to express myself, my head was bursting” [259]), she is surprised by her friend’s hostile reaction, for Lila turns the tables and inverts the binary: “I saw that her eyes narrowed as when she tried to grasp something fleeting. She said, in dialect, ‘You still waste time with those things [. . .]? We are flying over a ball of fire. The part that has cooled floats on the lava. On that part we construct the buildings, the bridges, and the streets, and every so often the lava comes out of Vesuvius or causes an earthquake that destroys everything.’” It is as though to speak in Italian, rather than dialect, is to miss what is more important, most material. Far from refined discourse and educated language providing a privileged standpoint as a basis for philosophical or political reflection, it is dialect that gets to the nub of things: “There are microbes everywhere that make us sick and die. There are wars. There is a poverty that makes us all cruel. Every second something might happen that will cause you such suffering that you’ll never have enough tears. And what are you doing?” (261). Dialect can also then be deployed as a weapon of the weak, as a means to undercut the pretensions of the privileged, or even to question (albeit also to affirm) the way that language is always a political issue.

Similarly, Elena is brought in to settle disputes between Lila and her future in-laws as they go looking for a wedding dress. In doing so, she demonstrates the power of educated rhetoric: “I set in motion a technique that I had learned in school [. . .]. I was lavish in setting out premises in the confident voice of someone who knows clearly where he wishes to end up. I said first—in Italian—that I liked very much the styles favored by Pinuccia [the future sister-in-law] and her mother” (293-4). Job done, as they leave the shop, Lila takes her friend aside: “You learn this in school?” she asks. “What?” Elena responds. “To use words to con people” (294). From start to finish, words are seen as threatening in *My Brilliant Friend*: we are told that the world in which the characters grew up was “full of words that killed: croup, tetanus, typhus, gas, war, lathe, rubble, work, bombardment, bomb, tuberculosis, infection.” And yet there is something ambivalent

about this malevolent vocabulary, in that it can also be used to recover the past, to rescue the traces of a formative friendship.

The social world that Ferrante's novel depicts is deeply structured according to disparities and differences of class, gender, wealth, language, and so on. Yet even within these constraints, there is room for movement and life, not least the "continuous game of exchanges and reversals that, now happily, now painfully, made [the two friends] indispensable to each other" (259). But there is also an occasional glimpse at the possibility of more fundamental displacements, of tremors that could one day lead to an earthquake that might bring everything down. The word "Communism," for instance, figures as both stigma and potential resource. More mysteriously, both clandestinely and somehow beneath language, Lila sometimes experiences what she later terms "dissolving margins," by which "the outlines of peoples suddenly dissolved, disappeared" (89), and in which she perceives "unknown entities that broke down the outline of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature" (91). Perhaps, as this story opens, with her vanishing on a line of flight, Lila's own margins have finally dissolved, leaving her literate friend once more in her wake, frustratedly trying to catch up to her by writing their shared story.

*works cited*

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Ferrante, Elena. *My Brilliant Friend. Book One: Childhood, Adolescence*. Trans. Anne Goldstein. New York: Europa, 2012.

Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neapel1956\\_33.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neapel1956_33.jpg)

Song: "Datemi un martello" (Rita Pavone)