



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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

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

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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“It’s been at least three decades since she told me she wanted to disappear without leaving a trace.” (20)

“She was expanding the concept of trace
out of all proportion. [. . .]

“I was really angry.” (22-23)

“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)

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.

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that condemn the dominated at best to
accept and even love their hate?

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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.



ACQUIRING A TASTE FOR DOMINATION



Naples street scene in 1956

For most of the neighbourhood's inhabitants, the height of their ambitions, as post-war consumer culture takes hold, is to buy a car, a TV set, perhaps a telephone.

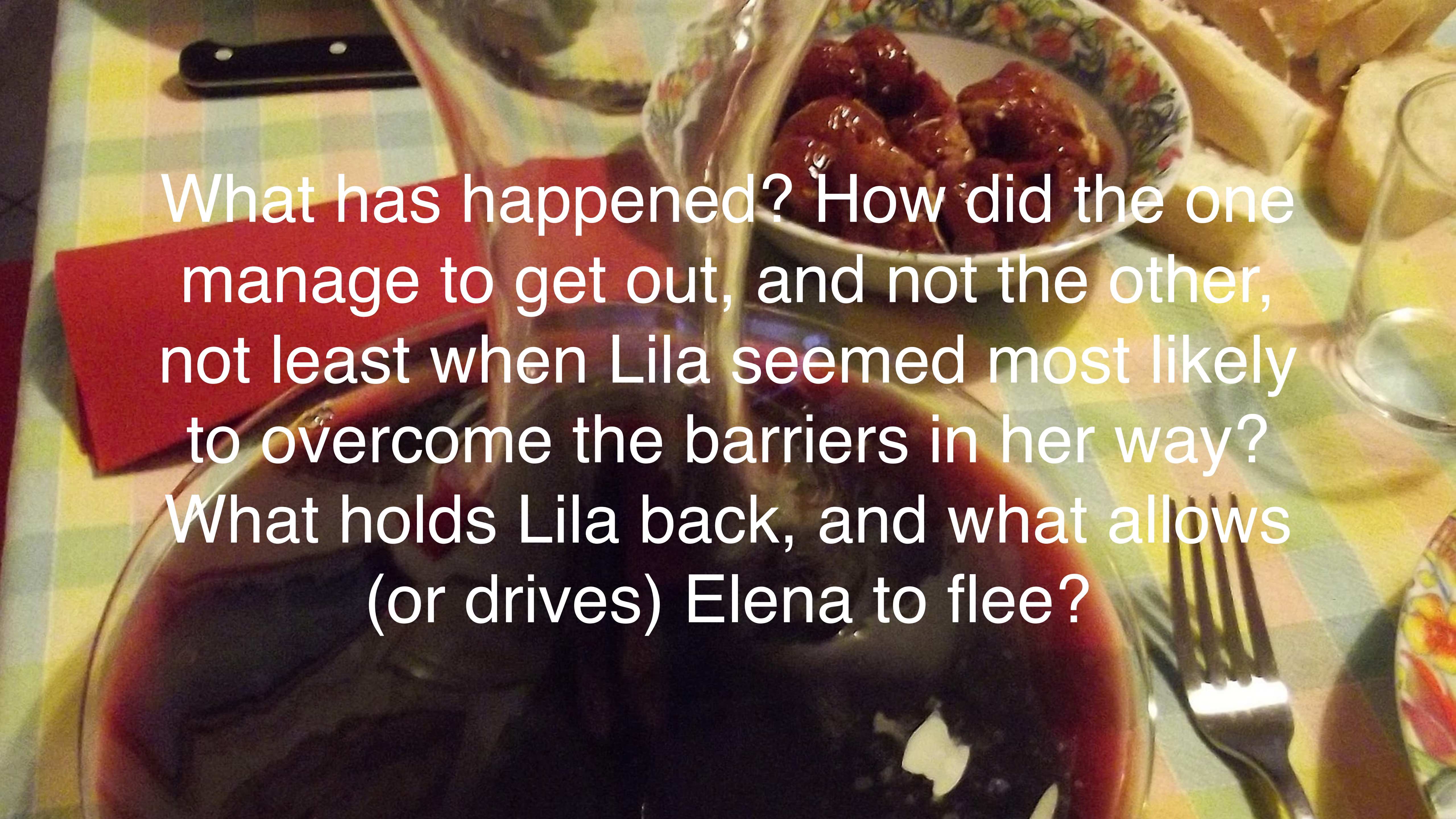
“Although she was fragile in appearance, every prohibition lost substance in her presence. She knew how to go beyond the limit without ever truly suffering the consequences. In the end people gave in, and were even, however unwillingly, compelled to praise her.” (64)

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.

“‘At a certain point school is over.’

“‘Not for you: you’re my brilliant friend,
you have to be the best of all,
boys and girls.’” (312)

What has happened? 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
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“Why should your sister, who is a girl, go to school?” (69)

““I failed on purpose. I don’t want to go to any school any more.’

““What will you do?’

““Whatever I want.”” (95)

The best they can do, it seems, is embrace
their fate, fight for their own servitude.

“They didn’t see any of the five of us.
We were not perceptible.
Or not interesting.” (192)

“Our laughter abruptly turned to fear. Lila first of all hurled herself at her brother [. . .] with 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.

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is a matter of learning their place.

You can conform by resisting, or by
betraying your friends and family.

“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)

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Either way, you lose!



MOBILIZING THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

There is no clearer marker of class
distinction than language.



Extent of Neapolitan Language Use

“the misshapen figure of my mother, her old shoes, her dull hair, the dialect bent into an ungrammatical Italian.” (93)

“I answered 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.” (103)

“We began to speak in the language of comics and books, which reduced 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,
the distinction is very viscerally felt
and reproduced.

Dialect in is repeatedly associated with insults and violence, while Italian is the medium for discussion of loftier, more academic topics.

This linguistic hierarchy is up for dispute.

“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)

“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.

“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 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.

“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 and her mother.” (293-4)

““You learn this in school?”

““What?”

““To use words to con people.”” (294)

“Our world was like that: full of words that killed: croup, tetanus, typhus, gas, war, lathe, rubble, work, bombardment, bomb, tuberculosis, infection.” (33)

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.

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Yet even within these constraints, there is room for movement and life.

“continuous game of exchanges and
reversals that, now happily,
now painfully, made us indispensable
to each other.” (259)

But there is 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.

Both clandestinely and somehow beneath language, Lila sometimes experiences what she 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).

Lila's own margins finally dissolve, leaving
her literate friend once more in her wake,
frustratedly trying to catch up to her
by writing their shared story.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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