The Ends of Plot: Rupture and Entanglement in L'amica geniale

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THE ENDS OF PLOT: RUPTURE AND ENTANGLEMENT IN L’AMICA GENIALE

by

VICTOR XAVIER ZAROUR ZARZAR

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Ends of Plot: Rupture and Entanglement in *L’amica geniale*

by

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Advisors: Professor Nancy K. Miller and Professor Giancarlo Lombardi

This dissertation employs narrative theory to contextualize Elena Ferrante’s successful saga, *L’amica geniale*, within the larger tapestry of European novelistic discourses. It engages with conceptions of narrative structure put forth by critics like Ortega y Gasset, Brooks, and Winnett to understand how *L’amica geniale* offers cutting commentary on our exegetic practices and advances a geometry of narrative entanglement. I contend that Ferrante recuperates and italicizes nineteenth-century modes of storytelling, displaying a form of epistemological tension rooted in a movement away from a belief in plot’s semantic potentialities and into the postulation of a poetics of *smarginatura* or rupture. I support this contention by scrutinizing the text’s several endings, as well as its apparent linear trajectory, through Genette’s notion of the *arbitraire*, coming to the conclusion that such linearity is entirely constructed by the protagonist in an effort to exact vengeance on her friend. I proceed to examine how the textual apparatus bears the brunt of this revelation. In doing so, I adopt Brooks’s thermodynamic model and reconfigure it into a metabolic model meant to monitor the set of activities and energetic transformations at work in the text. A look at Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, in Chapter 3, becomes essential to understand the formal aspects, especially as they relate to plot and plotting, of the framework in which Ferrante is working; I argue that, by engaging with notions of
entanglement, both novels at once work within the bounds of the *Bildungsroman* and display an inner resistance to it. I thus develop a resolutely comparative approach to an author whose work is generally viewed in the context of the Italian canon. While comparisons to writers such as Aleramo or Morante are productive and revelatory, this analysis finds that Ferrante is working within a larger framework that harks back to the origins of the modern European novel and that links her to authors like Fielding, Lennox, and Dickens.
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For their invaluable support, I wish to thank my supervisory committee, as well as all my professors and mentors along the way. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to you.

I also wish to thank all my brilliant friends. I love you.
A NOTE ON THE TEXT

For matters of practicality regarding parenthetical citation, the titles of some of Ferrante’s novels have been abbreviated in the following way:

*L’amica geniale* - AG

*Storia del nuovo cognome* - SNC

*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* - SFR

*Storia della bambina perduta* - SBP

*My Brilliant Friend* - MBF

*The Story of a New Name* - SNN

*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* - TLS

*The Story of the Lost Child* - SLC

*La frantumaglia / Frantumaglia* – Because the English translation preserves the Italian, I have chosen not to repeat the work’s title in the parenthetical citation for translations.

Most passages taken from articles written in Italian were translated by me. I specify on all occasions, except when I quote a word or very short phrase, in which case, for readability purposes, I simply include the translation in parentheses without any further specification.

Lastly, throughout the dissertation I refer to the entire Quartet as *L’amica geniale*. This might be somewhat misleading because parenthetical citations refer to the first instalment of the Quartet with the same name. Aside from these parentheses, the text makes it clear in the specific instances when it is discussing the first installment as opposed to the novel in its entirety.
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INTRODUCTION

I was tempted to begin by apologizing. An outpour of popular attention has followed the publication of Elena Ferrante’s cycle of novels L’amica geniale. Though Ferrante’s reputation in Italy was established in 1992, when her first novel—L’amore molesto—earned her a nomination for the Premio Strega, the author nevertheless managed to pass somewhat unperceived, especially in the international scene, through the publication of her second and third novels. It was not until the serial release of the so-called Neapolitan Novels that Ferrante became the global literary phenomenon that she is today. As is well known, it was her reception in the United States, in great part attributable to James Wood’s review of Days of Abandonment in The Guardian, that skyrocketed Ferrante to fame. And, in the process, to infamy. Her notoriety in the States ricocheted back to her native country, where it was met, yes, with joy by some, but with suspicion by the many who wondered why someone they perceived as a mediocre author could attract so much attention, and even lamented that Ferrante was progressively becoming the face of Italian literature abroad. That this face was, well, faceless, only added fuel to the fire. No doubt, this suspicion was also exacerbated by the enormous commercial success of the tetralogy. To this day, L’amica geniale has sold more than 5.5 million copies worldwide, and it has been translated into more than fifty languages (Santovetti, “Melodrama” 527).¹

Ferrante’s popularity has been continually disputed, her techniques have been denounced for pandering to popular taste, and her decision to use a pseudonym has been called out as a tactic to arouse the public’s morbid curiosity.² The style of her novels, in particular of L’amica

¹ For a succinct outline of the trajectory that the novels have followed and the controversy that has followed them, see Santovetti’s article. Milkova’s “The Translator’s Visibility” provides a valuable study of the Ferrante Fever phenomenon and the novels’ reception in the United States.
² The most disturbing reactions to Claudio Gatti’s invasive exposé were those that claimed that Ferrante had somehow “asked for it” because in refusing to reveal her biographical identity, she herself had played a part in feeding the public’s curiosity.
geniale, has been time and again questioned. To give a few examples: Raffaele Donnarumma writes of “uno stile che vuol essere piano e che invece ha poco peso, e a volte suona persino sciatto” (138) / “a style that aims to be clear but that instead has little weight, and at times even sounds sloppy” (my translation); Elisa Gambaro discusses “la disseminazione ipertrofica, e davvero eccessivamente scoperta, di … ingredienti simbolici” (“Il fascino” 172) / “the hypertrophic and excessively evident dissemination of … symbolic ingredients” (my translation), while considering why L’amica geniale might appeal to us in spite “dei suoi molti difetti e delle sue troppe ridondanze” (“Splendori” 165) / “of its many flaws and far too many redundancies” (my translation); Elena Porciani admits her perplexity vis-à-vis the critical attention that has been poured on the novels, stating that “forme di entusiasmo di fronte alla qualità della scrittura non mi paiono così giustificate” (174) / “forms of enthusiasm toward the quality of the writing do not appear to me justified” (my translation); she goes as far as speaking of a ferrea mediocritas distancing Ferrante from Elsa Morante.3 These and other similar statements, while taken from academic articles, seem to me symptomatic of a more general viewpoint whereby Ferrante’s novels, albeit entertaining—airport literature as it were—are ultimately unworthy of serious critical attention.

Such an attitude, I think, has given way to a sense of reserve in some of the criticism that takes Ferrante’s work as a serious object of study. Not in all of it, of course, and here I must recognize the work that has been done and is still being done in the field. Apart from the very illuminating articles that have been published on Ferrante’s novels, entire volumes have been dedicated to the author: Allegoria devoted an issue to her; Anna Maria Crispino and Marina

3 The criticism cannot find a unified voice, as is to be expected: Gambaro identifies a qualitative decrease in the third and fourth installments (“Splendori” 155), while Porciani complains in particular of the first two installments (176).
Vitale edited *Dell’ambivalenza*, a collection of essays that exclusively discussed the works of Goliarda Sapienza, Julie Otsuka, and Ferrante; in 2016, Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love edited a volume of articles called *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*; finally and most recently, 2018 saw the publication of *Elena Ferrante. Parole chiave*, a book-length study by Tiziana de Rogatis. The field is rapidly expanding. Still, the sense of reserve haunts even some of these scholarly sources, as it does blog posts and newspaper pieces, as well as conversations about Ferrante, academic and otherwise.

Take, for instance, Gambaro’s “Splendori e miserie di una duplice affabulazione,” quoted above. A study of the novel’s use of double narration, the article makes very valuable points with respect to the formal repercussions of dual protagonism; nevertheless, it is peppered with statements that point out Ferrante’s shortcomings, its very last sentence hijacked by a clause—a disclaimer, almost—about the novel’s many flaws and far too many redundancies, *in spite of which* it retains its power to speak to our present. *In spite of*. These three words are very telling. Or perhaps more telling is the need to proclaim them. Not to say that Ferrante’s work is perfect, nor that any writer’s is, yet it seems to me that all the reservations toward it, all the wariness—diffidence, almost—to give *too much* praise, and the concurrent need to balance any commendation with a nod to the novel’s defects (not really a critical assessment, but simply a *nod*), are in some ways a response to the negative reception that Ferrante has received in certain critical circles as well as a way to safeguard our own critical credentials.

Which is why I was tempted to begin by apologizing, making a formal defense for my decision to write a doctoral dissertation about an author who has not passed the test of time and whose stake in the literary canon has been vehemently called into question. I was tempted to
begin by providing critical rebuttals of Ferrante’s biggest detractors, to the end of establishing my object of study’s, and thus my, validity. But perhaps it is best to let the work speak for itself.

In the following pages, I have tried to approach *L’amica geniale* without diffidence. While it is beyond the scope and capacity of this dissertation to dismantle longstanding attitudes toward and conceptions of “high” and “low” literature, I have bypassed the problem simply by ignoring it and taking the work for what it is, regardless of whether I would have read it at an airport or in a classroom. I have decided, too, to analyze in these pages one of the most criticized aspects of the novels: their use of plot. That such a drastic turn in terms of narrative structure occurs between Ferrante’s first three published novels and *L’amica geniale* seemed reason enough for investigation, without taking into consideration how charged discussions of plot tends to be in academic circles. “Some who dismiss her writing as plot-driven and sentimental,” writes Rebecca Falkoff, “seem to accept that she is a woman.” It comes as no surprise that novels that rely heavily on plot tend to arise suspicion among many who approach literature critically (nor does it come as one that those who look down on plot-driven narratives associate them with women). The reasons for this escape me; might it be because well-plotted novels tend to be more popular? Certainly, *L’amica geniale* is as well-plotted as it is popular.

Or perhaps that is exactly one of the questions that the novel advances. What does it mean for a novel to be well-plotted? And along with it: Is plot *just* the enticing quality of a novel that we simply cannot put down? What is our relationship to plot and how does meaning unfold through it? This last question seems particularly relevant to the Quartet. In other words, what’s the point of the story that we are being told? One would be hard-pressed to deny that next to a desire for entertainment, a coterminal desire for meaning drives our reading of *any* text. So hardwired are we to construct semantic networks through narrative that we even tend find
meaning in the lack of meaning. Genette recognized this *horror vacui*: “l'horreur du vide et la pression du sens sont telles que cette absence de signe devient vite signifiante” (20) / “the abhorrence of a vacuum and the pressure for meaning are such that this absence of signs quickly becomes significant” (253-54). What’s the point, then? Many people I have spoken to, for instance, have asked precisely this question about Tina’s disappearance, or rather, about the fact that it remains unexplained—and, as we shall see, inexplicable. These people feel deceived, as if the plot had promised something and delivered something completely different. Here, without a doubt, is one of the strongest generic tensions in the Quartet, namely, the tension between what it sets out to be and what it turns out to be. A tension not to be ignored, I believe, and very telling of the transaction that we enter into when a story is told to us. Would it then be more accurate to say that these readers feel shortchanged?

Henry Fielding envisioned his relationship to readers as a transaction, and, in fact, turned the introductory chapter of *Tom Jones* into a “bill of fare to the feast.” He begins: “An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money” (29). He continues with a profession of his *bonne foi*:

To prevent, therefore, giving offence to their customers by any such disappointment, it hath been usual with the honest and well-meaning host to provide a bill of fare which all persons may peruse at their first entrance into the house; and having thence acquainted themselves with the entertainment which they may expect, may either stay and regale with what is provided for them, or may depart to some other ordinary better accommodated to their taste. (29)
Not limited to this introduction, Fielding announces to his readers that every book in his novel will be preceded by a chapter that, in presenting in advance the contents of the book, as a bill of fare would the food in a restaurant, will also introduce discursive considerations on the topics at hand.⁴ These chapters, of course, oftentimes veer off topic; on the surface, they appear as the epitome of the kind of authorial mark that Genette criticized when he wrote of “l’invasion du récit par le discours” (12) / “the invasion of narrative by discourse” (247). I am not interested in evaluating whether these discursive moments interfere with the plot, although, on the one hand, some narratological tools might help us differentiate the author from the narrator, and, on the other, these intrusions can be seen as a splendid example of the plethora of discursive possibilities granted to the novel in its early stages.⁵ Instead, I am drawn to the contract that Fielding established with his readers, and the ways in which this contract—perhaps setting a precedent for all novels to come—allows for the intrusion of discourses that are specifically related to genre and to the ways in which we extract meaning from stories.

In other words, what are we, as readers, “paying for”? Why do we “stay and regale” instead of departing to, say, Knausgård’s public ordinary? And what is Ferrante promising to “serve” us? Is she, like Fielding, positioning us as customers and therefore as arbiters of the quality of her work, or is this a promise to please us regardless of the quality of her work? She writes, in La frantumaglia: “Io non rinuncio a niente di ciò che può dare piacere al lettore, nemmeno a ciò che viene considerato vecchio, abusato, volgare” (260-61) / “I renounce nothing that can give pleasure to the reader, not even what is considered old, trite, vulgar” (270)—a statement that would seem like apology enough for those who fault her precisely for those things.

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⁴ Was Proust thinking of Fielding when, in Le Temps retrouvé, he wrote: “Une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix” (274) / “A work in which there are theories is like an object with its price-tag still attached” (190)?
⁵ Or, as Fielding himself put it, to “prosaici-comi-epic writing” (181).
Ferrante might not externalize this contract in an introductory chapter the way Fielding does, yet the statement above, and even a superficial reading of the Quartet, will reveal the conditions of this contract. It would not be farfetched, either, to suggest that every novel, in one way or another, partakes of this relationship with its readers. But still we ask ourselves what we’re paying for, or in less mercenary terms, what we are being served, and therefore: is L’amica geniale the story of Elena or of a friendship, of Lila or of Lila’s disappearance, or of Tina’s disappearance? And what does this have to do with form and genre? Critics have addressed these questions.

Upon the publication of the last installment of the Quartet, a reviewer for The Economist wrote that “from a literary perspective, Ms Ferrante’s approach is masterly. She uses the melodramatic tropes of soap opera to tell a cracking good story, all the while smuggling in piercing observations, like a file baked in a cake.” It seems that we cannot escape culinary metaphors when describing the consumption of literature. Like a file baked in a cake. Yet another iteration of the transactional pact between author and readers, but one that rightly places emphasis on its less pleasant aspects. Not a comforting image, certainly, yet neither are some of the ways of plotting in these novels. This dissertation had originally set out to investigate Elena’s decision to plot her friendship as a means to cope with the loss of a best friend, a way to assuage the pain of bereavement. I quickly found out, however, that this was only one side of the matter; plot, or rather, plotting soon revealed itself to be guided by a strong undercurrent of ambivalent impulses—the impulse to silence, the impulse to punish, to impulse to win, the impulse to blame.

In fact, as I hope these chapter will illustrate, one of the darker aspects of plot is its capacity to (re)allocate culpability. This is something that Ferrante has long been aware of and that all of her novels, in one way or another, have engaged with. In L’amore molesto, Amalia’s
culpability is revealed, through plot, to be in fact the young Delia’s, not to mention the fact that the entire novel is an attempt to answer the question: Who is at fault for Amalia’s death?

Similarly, *I giorni dell’abbandono* revolves around the issue of culpability insofar as Olga’s obsession is fueled by a desire to blame someone for the dissolution of her marriage. The issue surrounds Otto’s death as well. The link between plot and colpa, in fact, is externalized when Olga writes, after Carrano gifts her the spray nozzle: “Con quel dono stava provando a scagionare sé stesso, mi scagionava, attribuiva la morte di Otto alla casualità dei giochi del lupo durante la notte” (211) / “With that gift he was trying to exonerate himself, he was exonerating me, he was attributing the death of Otto to the chance of the games of a dog at night” (187). To exonerate, which is simply the other side of the coin from attributing guilt, a relocation of guilt if you will, therefore stands out as a prominent quality of the act of plotting—a nexus that *Great Expectations* renders magnificently, as we will see in Chapter 3. Of course, the question recurs in *La figlia oscura*, where Leda’s culpability for leaving her daughters is enmeshed with the theft of Elena’s doll. A grim outlook, indeed, but one that is undeniably present in these stories. Which is not to say that culpability is the only force behind the plotting activity. Plotting is a means to palliate, as Chapter 2 discusses; it can also be an instrument for liberation (in particular from generic ties, as Chapter 4 explores). More important, plotting, insofar as it is powered by desire, is always carried out relationally, or, as Chapter 3 argues, prepositionally.

These and other considerations are the material for the following pages. My study makes use of—and abuses—disparate theories and forms of criticism, all with the intent of pointing out some of the fascinating ways in which Ferrante writes in accordance to and against the form she has inherited. If an all-enveloping theory is lacking, it is because I have prioritized my primary texts, in the belief that no criticism can envelop the (to borrow Ferrante’s term) tangled knot that
is not only our existence, but literature as well. Certain critics stand out. Peter Brook’s analysis in *Reading for the Plot* is fundamental to my way of reading these novels. I particularly subscribe to his criticism of the brand of narratology that ignores the dynamic aspects of plot. Precisely because, like Brooks, I am interested in plotting, this dissertation pays close attention to the manner in which this activity comes about and how it is developed. As such, Brooks’s approach to plot and its retrospective qualities is central to my work, as are Genette’s concepts of motivation and the arbitrary. I take much, too, from Brooks’s readings of *Le Rouge et le noir*, and, especially, *Great Expectations*. Where we part ways is in his wholehearted adoption of the Freudian Masterplot to explain away the workings of plot and desire in narratives.

I would venture into a critique of my own, yet far more qualified scholars than I have preceded me in the task, most prominent of which is Susan Winnett, whose “Coming Unstrung” made evident “the Masterplot's reliance on male morphology and male experience.” Like Winnett, I am not after an alternative to wholly substitute Brooks’s Freudian Masterplot; instead, I would like to simply point out alternative ways of plotting that, while maintaining many of the workings outlined by Brooks, are more receptive to the experience of women, and, in particular, the women in Ferrante’s novels. To put it differently, it is my belief that there are as many ways of plotting—of inaugurating, advancing, and halting plot—as there are plots.

The work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis has been crucial to my conception of the ways in which form can be thematized. Though my interpretation of the phrase “writing beyond the ending” is different from DuPlessis’s (especially in my exploration of the Quartet’s narrative structure), her study of the inherent ideology of narrative and form illumined my thoughts on Ferrante, as well as countless other writers before her who refused to write according to scripted narratives that sanctioned, say, gendered roles. “Writing beyond the ending,” writes DuPlessis,
“means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative” (5). DuPlessis’s insights on writers like Woolf who write against a genre’s established norms forced me to consider the Quartet’s place in the history of the Bildungsroman, that most male of genres. It also prompted me to think about the tension between Ferrante’s more popular strains (that which seems to go with the current and ensure her popularity) and the destabilizing, more defiant veins subtending her novels. These are, in particular, the driving questions behind Chapters 3 and 4.

Precisely because of my concern with structure and genre, I have decided to dedicate Chapter 3 to Great Expectations. This might strike many as unusual. Most scholars who have looked at Ferrante comparatively have turned to the Italian canon, for instance, to Sibilla Aleramo or Elsa Morante; those who have ventured outside Italian bounds tend to mention—in my opinion, somewhat predictably—Austen, especially since Ferrante is an avowed reader of her. I think that these approaches are not only valid, but also valuable. That being said, because form, and plotting in particular, is what interests me most, I chose to look at L’amica geniale next to those works of literature that I believed would best complement or challenge its formal qualities. So that, even in my mention of Clarissa in Chapter 4, while setting off from the thematic importance that the liberty to refuse carries in Richardson’s novel (and in much of British literature), my interest lay on how this liberty is structurally transposed into the Quartet. Likewise, my interest in Wuthering Heights derives from its treatment of duality and identity and the ways in which these issues permeate the narrative scaffolding. Most importantly, in Great Expectations, I chose a work that not only complemented the Quartet’s formal qualities, but that also presented itself as a yardstick against which any Bildungsroman is inevitably measured. This, of course, is not to say that it should be the yardstick against which any Bildungsroman is
measured. Quite the contrary, for it is precisely the balance between influence and irreverence to literary tradition, between inspiration and “ideological conformity” that I attempt to trace out in some of these pages and that Ferrante herself has discussed at length in *La frantumaglia*. It is thus that even if Ferrante has never explicitly mentioned Dickens, I see much more of *Great Expectations* in the Quartet than I see of *Sense and Sensibility*.

My study, then, is firstly formal, and therefore to a certain extent distanced from scholarship on Ferrante that tends to deal with more strictly thematics issues, such as mother-daughter relations, friendship, or language. Undeniably, a formal analysis cannot be divorced from thematic issues, and vice versa. Which is why the work of scholars such as de Rogatis, Milkova, and Wehling-Giorgi has been immensely helpful in navigating the wide array of subjects that collide in the Quartet. As invaluable has been the work of others who have specifically looked at form in Ferrante, such as Raffaele Donnarumma and Olivia Santovetti. I have consciously avoided approaching the Quartet from an overriding vantage point; to their detriment or not, no singular theoretical practice guides these pages. Rather, I have attempted to see what the Quartet can reveal to us about the act of plotting through the ways in which Ferrante recuperates nineteenth century modes of storytelling and, to use Santovetti’s term, gives them a “twist” (“Melodrama” 527). This twist reveals itself, in my study at least, to be symptomatic of

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6 “Ma penso da tempo che, se dobbiamo coltivare la nostra tradizione narrativa, non dobbiamo mai rinunciare all’interno bagaglio di tecniche che abbiamo alle spalle. Dobbiamo dimostrare, proprio perché femmine, di saper costruire mondi ampi e potenti e ricchi quanto e più di quelli disegnati dai narratori. ... Ogni narratrice, come in tanti altri campi, non deve puntare solo ad essere la migliore tra le narratrici, ma la migliore tra chiunque coltivi la letteratura con grande abilità, femmina o maschio che sia. Per farlo dobbiamo sottrarci a ogni obbedienza ideologica, a ogni messa in scena di pensiero o linea giusta, a ogni canone” (257) / “But for a long time I’ve thought that if we have to cultivate our narrative tradition, we should never renounce the entire stock of techniques that we have behind us. We have to demonstrate, precisely because we are women, that we can construct worlds as wide and powerful and rich as those designed by male writers, if not more. ... Every woman novelist, as with women in many other fields, should aim at being not only the best woman novelist but the best of the most skilled practitioners of literature, whether male or female. To do so we have to avoid every ideological conformity, every false show of thought, every adherence to a party line or canon” (266).
an epistemological tension, a distancing away from the nineteenth century’s mode of revealing meaning through plot and into the postulation of a poetics of *smarginatura*, a poetics of erasure. In other words, if Ferrante has been praised, among other things, for a much-overdue portrayal of female friendship, for her particularly gut-wrenching and personal stories, her “lucid, austere and honest” style (Wood), what concerns me here is to understand just how these novel subjects are reflected or refracted in the structure of the text—how the scaffolding of a genre laden with expectations and norms is affected by the inclusion of these themes. If Chapter 3 focuses on *Great Expectations* a little more than would seem appropriate in a dissertation that is resolutely not about Dickens, it is because, among other things, I have tried to give a full picture of the narrative mechanisms that Ferrante restores before discussing how she reworks them, so that the issues raised in Chapter 3 vis-à-vis *Great Expectations* are taken up again in Chapter 4 in regards to *L’amica geniale*.

The length and scope of this dissertation comes, doubtlessly, with its own limitations. The linguistic issue, for instance, remains largely untouched, even if it is central to the Quartet, while the issue of gender, less untouched, is still only approached formally. Ferrante’s novels are famously receptive to an exploration of gender. Many before me have explored them through this lens, in particular through the mother-daughter bond. Scholars such as Stiliana Milkova, Leslie Elwell, and Christine Macsimowicz come to mind, and I rely on their invaluable work for the moments when my discussion does turn to gender. Which is the case, for instance, when speaking of genre in Chapter 4. Susan Fraiman’s *Unbecoming Women* was of tremendous assistance, too. Fraiman details the overwhelmingly male baggage that the *Bildungsroman* carries; she searches “not for a female version of one figure’s private formation but for a

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7 Andrea Villarini, Jillian R. Cavanaugh, and Stephanie V. Love, to name a few, have contributed relevant scholarship on the topic of language in Ferrante’s novels.
wrestling with the range of discursive possibilities for becoming a woman in a given culture … a postmodernization of the Bildungsroman, if you will” (x). Her thoughts on George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss are central to my conception of the Quartet, as was her consideration of discourses of development at war in a text. Fraiman’s analysis of “Eliot’s manipulation of ‘masculine’ plots and discourse” (124) led me to address the elephant in the critical room that is scholarship on the Quartet: Is it a Bildungsroman? Thanks to Fraiman’s and Brooks’s studies, I began to pay particular attention to the generic discourses at war in the Quartet: fairy-tale, developmental, and illicit plots included, and very importantly, who gets to live which. Winnett’s and Nancy K. Miller’s analyses of how Eliot destabilizes Tom’s Bildung with Maggie’s story provided me with precious tools to explore the decentering presence of Lila in the Quartet, and how that itself might be a way of writing against prescribed genres and formulas. This critical enquiry relates to what has been one of the most lauded aspects of the Quartet: the fact that a friendship between two women takes centerstage.

In my discussion of genre, as well as my discussion of the retrospective qualities of plot, endings are particularly important. My discussion throughout these pages, in fact, is mostly dictated by what I interpret to be the different endings to different plots within the novel (or novels, if we consider Great Expectations). Chapter 1 is entirely constructed around the ending of Elena’s text, or the embedded narrative; along with Chapter 2, it also attempts to understand the structural repercussions of Tina’s disappearance, itself an ending of sorts. Chapter 4 and the conclusion focus on Lila’s disappearance as an ending, as well as on the return of the dolls, or the novel’s proper ending, both ultimately working toward short-circuiting any substantial attempt to wrest a stable meaning out of the novel. They explore how this, in fact, can be related to genre. Nancy K. Miller’s statement that Eliot’s Maggie “refuses the hospitality of the happy
“end” (47) seems pertinent to the end of the Quartet; it made me conceive of genres as receptacles, or homes, as Miller suggests, that can also be inhospitable. Finally, her discussion of italicization as a means of repossessing allowed me great insight into Lila’s decision to vanish.

For the question of desire, I began with Brooks’s conception of it as initiatory of narrative, yet quickly found many other scholars who have also engaged with this question. Girard’s *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* is not only an exceptional study of the novelistic form, but also a vital tool to analyze the triangularity of desire, which I have reframed, via a somewhat pedantic linguistic analysis, as the prepositionality of desire. This dynamic, as the last two chapters argue, is played out almost to the letter in *Great Expectations* and in the Quartet, through the intricate ways in which Elena and Lila desire what the other desires.

Barthes’s conception of desire, as well as that of the pleasure of the text, speak directly to the way in which the reading of these novels activates in us a desire to better understand the lives of these women, but more interestingly, on how the text promises us a certain pleasure, only to eventually hijack it. Here, we return to Fielding’s pact. Teresa de Lauretis incorporates Barthes but speaks too of the plea for a new language of desire more receptive to the female experience. In a privileged place along this line of revisionary scholars lies Adriana Cavarero, whose *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* is an important theoretical text to approach the Quartet and central to my understanding of desire’s prepositionality. Moreover, Cavarero’s notion of the self’s desire to be narrated by another challenged—and continues to challenge—my understanding of Elena’s narrative and its intended audience, prompting me to investigate the text’s vast subterranean regions.

Cavarero, finally, sees the art of narration as a feminine art, opposed to the masculine, universalizing task of philosophy:
Da sempre, l'attitudine per il particolare fa di esse delle narratrici eccellenti. Ricacciate, come Penelope, nelle stanze dei telai, sin dai tempi antichi esse hanno intessuto trame per le fila del racconto. Hanno appunto intessuto storie, lasciandosi così incautamente strappare la metafora del textum dai letterati di professione. Antica o moderna, la loro arte si ispira a una saggia ripugnanza per l'astratto universale e consegue a una pratica quotidiana dove il racconto è esistenza, relazione e attenzione. (73)

Throughout the ages, the aptitude for the particular makes them into excellent narrators. Cornered in weaving rooms, like Penelope, they have, since ancient times, woven plots with the thread of storytelling. They have woven [intessuto] stories, letting them casually tear the metaphor of the textum of professional men of letters. Whether ancient or modern, their art aspires to a wise repudiation of the abstract universal, and follows an everyday practice where the tale is existence, relation and attention. (54)

This statement seems to me in perfect synchrony with Ferrante’s call for the return of the narrative tradition, as well as her discussion of the need for the novel to reconcile itself with its origins and move beyond the experimental acrobatics of the twentieth century. In short, Cavarero’s insistence on the specificity of the individual life story as the repository of identity coincides, on the one hand, with Elena’s drive to tell her friend’s story in its utmost detail, and, on the other, with the division of the entire work into storie.

Theorists of the novel, too, are fundamental in my research insofar as they point to the genre’s inherent nihilism. Beginning with Lukács, moving on to Bakhtin, Ortega y Gassett, Franco Moretti, Ian Watt, Milan Kundera, and Thomas Pavel—the novel’s status as the prominent form of a godless modernity has been reiterated. While this grand theory might seem out of place here, it is nevertheless useful because it coincides with the way in which Ferrante’s
characters themselves use their novelistic fictions to grapple with the ultimate meaninglessness of their life experiences—how, as I write elsewhere, they attempt to produce meaning out of form.

Lastly, I am forced to address the vexed question of Ferrante’s identity, to which I can only respond, somewhat laconically, that it is none of my concern, nor should it be anybody’s. The closest this dissertation comes to approaching the subject is in Chapter 4, through the discussion of authorial orchestration and the metamorphic process whereby author becomes work. And it is with the work that I have decided to stay. In a letter to Roberto Saviano, who in 2015 made a case to nominate Ferrante for the Premio Strega, Ferrante wrote: “è inutile chiedermi il permesso. Nessun lettore scrive per avere il mio consenso, se deve usare L’amica geniale per tenere in piedi un tavolo cui s’è spezzata una gamba” (“Accetto”) / “it’s useless to ask my permission. No reader writes to me for permission to use My Brilliant Friend to prop up a table with a broken leg” (trans. by Falkoff).

Useless to ask for permission then. We will let the work speak for itself.
A FOREWORD ON FORM

“(Write it!)”

How does a work speak for itself? What are the elements to which we must be attentive if we want to listen to what a novel has to say? As suggested in the introduction, formal attributes allow us an intimate glimpse into the unique contribution of a given work. Accordingly, I chose to write dissertation about form, and the form we give things in order to make them palatable. More specifically, this is a dissertation about L’amica geniale and two women in this novel—women who plot in diverse ways and under the influence of contradictory impulses. Women who react to semantic voids in obverse ways, one of whom gravitates toward form by putting pen to paper, the other one pulled by forces of disintegration and, therefore, formlessness. By no means is form a novel topic. The first thing Genesis tells us is that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. But the earth was without form, and empty, and darkness “was upon the face of the deep” (King James Version, Gen 1.2), so God created light. The rest, of course, is history. History with a meaning, that is. Meaning conferred by form. The anxiety of formlessness (and loss of meaning) hovers over the history of artistic and philosophical creation, and the works that have in one way or another engaged with it are far too many to list here. Suffice it to say, then, that for the purposes of this dissertation, and in what concerns our protagonists, or rather, these lives as plotted stories, we can posit the following dictum: In the beginning was loss. The rest, is story.

As a point of entry into the lives of Elena and Lila, and because we will spend enough time with them in the following pages, I would like for now to direct our attention to a work that was not written by Ferrante but that represents a fine marriage between content and form. I have chosen to begin with a poem because, in many ways, poetry is the most formal of genres. If the
novel gained so much traction during modernity, it is because both the epoch and the genre share what Franco Moretti has called a “protean elusiveness” (5). Moretti is not alone in this view. Ian Watt has written about the “poverty of the novel’s formal conventions” (13) and John Brenkman about the novel as a genre that “thrives in the impurity of its forms” (892). This is certainly truer of the novel in its nascent stages; centuries later, it feels as if the novel, too, has traveled a long way and is anything but. Even so, poetry has undoubtedly been more subject to formal conventions, and the radical poetic inventions of the last century can only attest to this. That form is constraint, few would deny. Yet few, too, would deny that many thrive under constraint—whether because they see form as the perfect Apollo to content’s Dionysus or simply because, like Wordsworth’s nuns, they prefer their convent’s rooms narrow. At stake here is also the tricky business of distinguishing form from formal convention, which the following chapters will address. My aim in the following pages is to illustrate some of the potentialities of form as a tool to engage with those aspects of our existence that challenge and destabilize our understanding of the world.

I have chosen to begin with this poem because it illustrates, in nineteen lines, some of the themes and formal devices that this dissertation will explore. The poem is Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art.” It went through seventeen drafts, the first of which was titled “HOW TO LOSE THINGS/? /The GIFT OF LOSING THINGS” and is really just a catalogue of things the speaker has lost (Millier 124). The tone is conversational, the diction simple, and there seems to be no organizing principle whatsoever other than Bishop’s drive to communicate something, expressed in the mind’s unconstrained survey of its own losses. The final poem, as a villanelle, looks like this:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Scholars much more qualified than I have analyzed this poem, so rather than venture into a close
reading or in-depth analysis, I would simply like to point out a couple of ways in which this
poem speaks to my reading of Ferrante’s novel.

The speaker has lost many things and is convinced that these losses do not constitute
disaster. Criticism has long remarked on the way the poem presents loss progressively, as if to
treat by exposure. Begin with the little things: lost door keys, some wasted hours, and
progressively move up to the big losses, Bishop seems to say, until you are prepared to front the
great loss. The poem’s imperative mood consolidates this interpretation, suggesting that the
speaker (Bishop even, perhaps) has experienced this and is therefore qualified to dispense
advice. The poem presents a speaker who has ostensibly become wiser through loss. Along this
same line of interpretation, one could also see the speaker as engaged in a variation of the fort/da
game that Freud details in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, intent on mastering a painful
experience by actively reproducing it. One crucial difference arises between the speaker’s and Ernst’s situation, however, which will allow me to advance a rarely addressed point about “One Art”: in the case of the little boy, the loss is recurring—the mother constantly leaves the room—making the exercise of active loss a preemptive one. And even if, as Freud hints, this same exercise will prepare the boy for the eventual death of the mother, it is the recurring loss that brings about the fort/da game.

But, we say, the speaker of “One Art” subordinates all her losses to the great one, and that joking voice is lost only once; the prospect of being prepared to lose other joking voices seems too distant a preoccupation for a poem that traffics in such urgency. How can the loss of the loved one create the need for the poem in the first place, becoming both the culmination of a process and its catalyst? This inconsistency is easily resolved if we conceive of the poem as a retrospective exercise and adopt what Peter Brooks has pithily called “the anticipation of retrospection” (23) in narrative (that he is speaking here of plot does not affect the fact that the speaker of “One Art” is, in some way, weaving a story). In other words, it is always in light of the end that we read beginnings and middles—in light of whatever realization comes at the end that we imbue with meaning everything that came before. Brooks’s discussion of meaning in narratives is much more nuanced, but for now it is on this aspect of retrospection that I would like to focus. We can now begin to see how the loss of the loved one has activated in the speaker’s mind the desire to find some sort of logical progression that has led to it—not, in this case, a progression-as-causation, but rather a sense of progression at the service of the poem’s main idea: that one must prepare for the big loss by actively losing little things.

Of course, the coincidental loss of the little things was not in itself meant to prepare, did not in itself mean anything other than that memory is fallible and that things happen, but that the
speaker sees these losses as part of a connected progression, and, more important, as oracular, is entirely dependent on the enormous loss suffered that, precisely because meaningless, demands some sort of interpretation. Might we, then, borrow Brooks’s term and, for our selfish purposes, speak of “the retrospection of preemption”? Because these losses were not actually preemptive (otherwise, they would have mitigated the loss of the loved one), at least their retroactively preemptive status is serviceable to a narrative meant to appease the speaker. The tendency to imbue meaning is very clearly embodied in a word that did not come until the fifteenth draft of the poem: “intent.” It seems that Bishop had been struggling with the line for a long time (for fourteen drafts, it awkwardly read “so many things seem really to be meant”) until she finally figured out a way to incorporate “intent.” This word is important for several reasons: firstly, it highlights the organizing structure behind the poem, imbuing it with the “goal-oriented and forward-moving” (12) qualities that Brooks attributes to plot (and which I transpose to the “narrative” of this poem), qualities that confer metaphoric meaning to what otherwise would be meaningless metonymic occurrences. Secondly, whereas the original “seem really to be meant” places intention on a nebulous, providential plane, “intent” is much more specific—although, and this is important, hinting at the possibility of hypallage. We are forced to ask: how can things seem filled with any intent, let alone the “intent to be lost”? How can things, in other words, be culpable? Is this simply a poetic device at work; has Bishop displaced, or better, given that we are speaking of losing, misplaced the “intent” that in fact belongs to the speaker? Has she, to return to our introduction, reallocated culpability? This case would suggest a Freudian scenario that coincides with the idea of actual preemptive action—the speaker wants to lose in order to practice—or it can suggest more subterranean desires of self-harm. The first of these hypotheses,

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8 For a more detailed description of the stages of the poem, see Millier’s “Elusive Mastery.”
we have ruled out, seeing as we are now dealing with retrospective preemption; the second seems much more interesting and finds an echo in what are arguably the most important moments of *L’amica geniale*, the loss of the dolls and the loss of Tina, and therefore in the suggestion contained in the words Elena fears her daughter might yell at Lila: “tu Tina l’hai voluta perdere, non è successo per caso” (*SBP* 335) / “you wanted to lose Tina, it didn’t happen by chance” (*SLC* 353).

We will come back to this moment. For now, allow me to leave this second hypothesis in suspension (hoping that it will become more suggestive at a more advanced stage) and focus instead on what “One Art” actually says, that is, that this is no hypallage and that these things are filled with intent. This premise is in accordance to the narrative act of retrospectively imbuing things and events with meaning. But we repeat: things *cannot* have intention. Here we come to a compromise, for even if the intent does not necessarily belong to the speaker, it is given by her and originates in the desire to process loss and obtain wisdom. We have arrived at the first conclusion I draw from this poem that I would like to extend to my conception of plotting in *L’amica geniale*: that both the speaker of “One Art” and Elena have experienced a tremendous loss, and that this loss has forced them to look back on their lives to order them—*plot* them—a process which inevitably entails the imposition of meaning on things and events that, outside of a chain of signification, are meaningless. We will certainly not fall into the mistake of assuming that the narrative tendency to impose retrospective meaning is exclusive to Bishop and Ferrante, yet this process is thematized in these works in ways that are, as is my purpose to show, original.

One of the aspects of this originality is the ways in which these women are aware of the fictive meanings they wrest out of existence. Although some hint of self-deception is evident from the very first line of “One Art” (*who*, we ask, would dare come up with such a bold claim
as “the art of losing isn’t hard to master”?), it is the last stanza that reveals the full deceit—and conceit—on which the poem is built. That “Even,” preceded by the M dash, introduces us into the great loss of the loved one. What the speaker presents as “evident” is, in fact, the opposite: what has been in the poem a series of repetitions without variation (the refrain: “the art of losing isn’t hard to master”) suddenly becomes the “evident” truth that “the art of losing’s not too hard to master” (emphasis mine). That some hardship has finally been acknowledged is a crack in the façade the speaker has put up until now (evidenced in the bravado of the refrain itself). This crack becomes a much greater fissure in the last line of the poem, in which the speaker recognizes that this loss truly does look like disaster. Needless to say, we assume that this “look like” is in fact an “is,” and that the speaker is utterly overwhelmed by loss, to the point that, and this is where the fissure I just spoke of is transposed into the form of the poem, she tells herself (in parentheses, italicized, followed by an exclamation point—three gestures highly unusual for Bishop, famed for her meticulousness and austerity): “(Write it!).”

At this point, it becomes evident that the poem is not simply an interior monologue, but rather the staging of an actual act of writing. This sudden parenthetical pull into the act of writing is doubtless disorienting, but it serves to highlight the role that writing has in the act of processing loss. The speaker, we learn, has been dispensing advice not to us, but to herself; the two refrains are a pretense that cannot be believed. That the main deceit happens with the refrains is no coincidence, for it is through repetition that the speaker is attempting to master loss. Not the repetition of an act as a shortcut to mastery, but rather repetition as a process of what Brooks calls “binding.” This last stanza shifts the focus from the idea that it’s the repeated and active loss of small things that enables mastery to the implication that it’s the linguistic repetition that allows for it to occur. The refrains thus gain incantatory power, not entirely
curative, but at least palliative. We have now moved from the level of content to that of form, and to what is perhaps best known about this poem: that it is a villanelle.

The villanelle is famed for being a particularly unyielding poetic form; it contains two refrains and two repeating rhymes. The tension in the poem arises from the struggle of such a rigid form to contain (through centripetal force, one could say) the overwhelming emotions caused by bereavement (which operate centrifugally). Critics have long remarked on this. Anne Colwell writes: “[B]y embodying uncontrollable emotion in a form meant to control it, and in an utterance meant to deny it, Bishop can create tension, ambivalence, and a poignant recognition of the pathos of human attempts to control the uncontrollable” (178). To control the uncontrollable. It is precisely in this paradox that this dissertation would like to make its home, though perhaps it would be better to speak of an effort to “understand the unintelligible” or, to put it in Ferrantean terms, to “fight the error of the Shapeless” (Frantumaglia 19). The concept of shapelessness is crucial to Ferrante’s conception of the mother’s body, and it is my purpose to flesh out the ways in which form-making can, in this sense, be a gendered activity. At any rate, at this moment it is the use of repetition that interests me, for it is the speaker’s—the speaker’s, not Bishop’s—only way of linking discrete events into a meaningful whole. In Brooks’s words: “Repetition in all its literary manifestations may in fact work as a ‘binding,’ a binding of textual energies that allows them to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form, usable ‘bundles,’ within the energetic economy of the narrative” (101). Note Brooks’s use of the word “master” and the poem’s presentation of the loss process as an artistic one to be mastered. Is loss really an art? Or have we now drifted into the territory of sublimation? This is my last point about “One Art” in relation to Ferrante: that just as the speaker has rescued her experience—retrospectively—from what

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9 Whether the novel truly conceives of the shapeless as an error is something that we will return to in our conclusion.
Hannah Arendt calls an “intolerable sequence of events” (qtd. in Cavarero 2) and, as it were, imprisoned it in the villanelle’s narrow rooms, so will Elena be forced to reexamine, in a much more discursive way because of generic potentialities, her life, all in the retrospective light of the traumatic event that inaugurates the narrative (but is, too, a culmination). This does not mean that Elena’s retrospection will be exclusively communicated in the elegiac form, or that L’amica geniale is a novel about mourning; as hinted by the introduction, and as the following chapter will examine, the elegiac more often than not gives way to the palimpsestic, the outright punitive, the odic, etc. Moreover, just as “One Art” returns us to the act of writing, and in its refrains and title brings in the art of writing, so do we believe that both Bishop and Ferrante are advancing larger commentaries on the ways in which we plot our lives and grant fictive significance to our experiences. Thus, to repeat and vary an earlier statement, we can say that, for Elena: In the beginning was loss. The rest, is (Write it!).

But there is another side to loss. Bishop’s poem recognizes this. We have addressed how the first poem reveals the speaker’s self-deception most in that last, slight variation. The case is the same with the second refrain. Whereas Bishop plays around with formal conventions, all but the last repetition speak in one way or another of how losing will not bring disaster. The last line of the poem, nevertheless, actually varies in meaning, now signaling to the fact that losing looks like—“(Write it!”)—disaster. We come here to a triadic relation shared by Bishop’s poem and Ferrante’s novels: the connection between loss, writing, and “disaster.” Of course, discerning readers will know by the end of “One Art” that the loss of the loved one is nothing but disaster, despite what the speaker tells herself. And yet, while we are told what these losses look like, and even get a synecdoche for the lover, the disaster that is so eminent in the poem remains ill-defined. I’d like to set off from what this “disaster” intimates into a discussion of the state of
mind which loss brings about in Ferrante’s women, who are, in this sense at least, much less reticent than Bishop’s speaker.

Loss is perhaps much too vague or broad to fill a novel. It’s the reaction to it, and whatever it reveals, that is more resolutely novelistic. In the case of Ferrante’s protagonists, this revelation is contained in one word, perhaps *the* central world of that vast and self-contained universe that is Ferrante’s lexicon: *frantumaglia*, which Ferrante describes as follows:

Mia madre mi ha lasciato un vocabolo del suo dialetto che usava per dire come si sentiva quando era tirata di qua e di là da impressioni contraddittorie che la laceravano. Diceva che aveva dentro una frantumaglia. La frantumaglia (lei pronunciava *frantumìglia*) la deprimeva. A volte le dava capogiri, le causava un sapore di ferro in bocca. Era la parola per un malessere non altrimenti definitibile, rimandava a una folla di cose eterogenee nella testa, detriti su un’acqua limacciosa del cervello. La frantumaglia era misteriosa, causava atti misteriosi, era all’origine di tutte le sofferenze non riconducibili a una sola evidentissima ragione. (94)

My mother left me a word in her dialect that she used to describe how she felt when she was racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart. She said that inside her she had a frantumaglia, a jumble of fragments. The frantumaglia (she pronounced it frantumìglia) depressed her. Sometimes it made her dizzy, sometimes it made her mouth taste like iron. It was the word for a disquiet not otherwise definable, it referred to a miscellaneous crowd of things in her head, debris in a muddy water of the brain. The frantumaglia was mysterious, it provoked mysterious actions, it was the source of all suffering not traceable to a single obvious cause. (99)
This last sentence portrays *frantumaglia* as a floating signifier, ready to absorb whatever sense of *malaise* one feels, but as this dissertation will show, *frantumaglia* is both capacious as well as represented in a very specific manner in these novels; it is also gendered. Ferrante continues:

La frantumaglia è il deposito del tempo senza l’ordine di una storia, di un racconto. La frantumaglia è l’effetto del senso di perdita, quando si ha la certezza che tutto ciò che ci sembra stabile, duraturo, un ancoraggio per la nostra vita, andrà a unirsi presto a quel paesaggio di detriti che ci pare di vedere. La frantumaglia è percepire con dolorosissima angoscia da quale folla di eterogenei leviamo, vivendo, la nostra voce e in quale folla di eterogenei essa è destinata a perdersi. (95)

The frantumaglia is the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story. The frantumaglia is an effect of the sense of loss, when we’re sure that everything that seems to us stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of debris that we seem to see. The frantumaglia is to perceive with excruciating anguish the heterogeneous crowd from which we, living, raise our voice, and the heterogeneous crowd into which it is fated to vanish. (100)

Two things become evident here. We will begin with the second. *Frantumaglia* here is described as the *effect* of loss, is thus the disaster that Bishop’s speaker feels around her. *Frantumaglia*, however, makes something evident that is only implied in “One Art”: it is undeniably the result of a realization of life’s ultimate meaninglessness, and, in this sense, is not “disaster,” for the word, in its very etymology—“ill-starred”—indicates a calamity caused by the “unfavorable aspect of a star or planet” (“disaster,” def. 2). *Frantumaglia* is not providential, and it is key for Ferrante’s women not to be able to attribute to some divinity or astrological event the loss in
their lives; it is essential insofar as, through loss, their worlds disintegrate. These women, then, cannot be subjected to either a providential or a social masterplot.

I wrote romantic instead of social before. Nonetheless, a quick survey of Ferrante’s novels reveals that loss is multivalent. *L’amore molesto* stages the loss of the mother, *I giorni dell’abbandono* the loss of the loved one, *La figlia oscura* the loss of children, and *L’amica geniale* the loss of a friend. What is important is that the loss be of someone who was a powerful agent in the creation of a masterplot for the protagonist, so that when this agent is removed, the fantasy of coherence (both as congruity and cohesion) disintegrates. Chapter 3 will approach this issue through Girard’s concept of triangular desire, so that the loss of meaning occasioned by the loss of a person is one and the same with the loss of desire. And, indeed, Lila’s disappearance pulls the rug from under her friend precisely because Elena’s sense of self—as these chapters will outline—is based largely on the myriad of ways in which she has related and compared herself to Lila, in which she has desired *through* her. This relation comes in many forms, some of them more positive than others: competition and collaboration, envy and admiration. But if the object that conferred meaning has been lost, how then to go on with life? In looking for an answer, we find an opportunity to link these women’s lives to the novelistic form. Lukács is not alone in viewing the novel as “die Epopöe der gottverlassenen Welt” (87) / “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Time and again since its inception, the novel has been regarded as the nihilistic form *par excellence*. I would like to tie this inherent nihilism of the novel to the nihilism of *frantumaglia*. Lúkacs is right in asserting that artistic forms “müssen alles selbst hervorbringen, was sonst einfach hingenommene Gegebenheit war” (32) / “have to produce out of themselves all that was once simply accepted as given” (38). These women too, having lost their providential and social masterplots, must now produce meaning out of their own
lives. As it was for Bishop’s speaker and for Lúkacs, this is a formal process. These women must produce meaning out of their own fictions, and here we return to the first point I wanted to make about the last passage, in which Ferrante describes *frantumaglia* as “il deposito del tempo senza l’ordine di una storia, di un racconto.” If we are to translate this into narrative terms, which is precisely what this investigation is after, *frantumaglia* becomes, to take our terminology from the Russian formalists, *fabula*.

*Fabula* and *sjužet* refer, respectively, to the events presented in the narrative and the order in which these events are presented. Of course, as readers we only ever encounter the *sjužet*, and as Peter Brooks recognizes, “the apparent priority of *fabula* to *sjužet* is in the nature of a mimetic illusion, in that the *fabula*—‘what really happened’—is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjužet*” (13). Nevertheless, plot, for Brooks and for our purposes, is not *sjužet*. Via Ricoeur, Brooks writes of plot as the interpretive activity:

elicited by the distinction between *sjužet* and *fabula*, the way we use the one against the other. … an aspect of *sjužet* in that it belongs to the narrative discourse, as its active shaping force, but that it makes sense (as indeed *sjužet* itself principally makes sense) as it is used to reflect on *fabula*, as our understanding of story. Plot is thus the dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse” (13).

Like Bishop’s speaker, who makes poetry out of disaster, Elena weaves her plot out of the skein of *frantumaglia*. Ferrante has addressed this process: “L’atto di scrittura è il passaggio continuato da quella frantumaglia di suoni, emozioni, cose, alla parola e alla frase, al racconto di Delia, Olga, Leda, Lenù” (278) / “The act of writing is the continuous conveyance of that *frantumaglia* of sounds, emotions, and things to the word and the sentence, to the story of Delia, Olga, Leda, Lenù” (288).
All of Ferrante’s novels stage this dialectical play between the forces that threaten to disintegrate and the characters’ effort to keep those forces at bay through plotting, which in some cases also means discarding the wrong plot in the search for the right one. It is central to my argument, however, that Ferrante advances a critique of the limits of plot to bind and imbue with meaning life experiences. A critique which takes form not solely in the protagonists’ self-awareness about the fictions of their lives, but also in the ways in which these plots fail to plug leaks in meaning and at times are fractured by destabilizing quasi-fantastical elements. Of course, the dialectical play of forces I mentioned before has different valences in each novel, as do the means of destabilization. The first three are undeniably narrower in scope. Together, they investigate the trifecta of loss: loss of the mother, loss of the partner, and loss of the children, and their focus is on the threat of disintegration. In L’amica geniale, Ferrante not only displaces this threat (Lila, who is always narrated, never narrator, is most at risk of disintegrating), but also dissolves it in a narrative that borrows extensively from the capacious genre of the Bildungsroman. By doing so, Ferrante is, among other things, moving on from a prevalently thematic depiction of disintegration and reintegration to a formal one. Smarginatura, the Quartet’s central word, will therefore not simply take on the role of affect for our purposes but will also be representative of the ways in which Ferrante goes beyond the margins of plotted narrative. More than any of its predecessors, the Quartet formalizes the fissures occasioned by the frantumaglia (the same fissure caused in “One Art” by “(Write it!)”) and culminates the previous novels’ critique of plot. For these women, as for Bishop’s speaker, plotting is palliative, yet it always leaves a residue behind. But more of this later; for now, suffice it to say that L’amica geniale finds its home in the frantumaglia. Thus, we have arrived at a final variation of our dictum. In the beginning was frantumàglia. The rest, is plot.
CHAPTER 1. LAST THINGS FIRST

“Sapevo con chiarezza cosa avrei raccontato: un’amicizia che comincia col gioco perfido delle bambole e si esaurisce con la perdita di una figlia.”

In the beginning was frantumɔ̀glia. The rest, is plot. But already we have been deceived by language. The formulation itself is dishonest, for in saying that the rest is plot, and that, consequently, there was something before plot, we are already speaking in terms of temporality. Lukács recognized that there is no way of escaping from the clutches of temporality, not in the modern world, abandoned by God as he thought it was, a world devoid of the closed totality of the epic. “In der Epopöe,” he writes, “ist die Lebensimmanenz des Sinnes so stark, daß die Zeit von ihr aufgehoben wird” (125) / “In the epic the life-immanence of meaning is so strong that it abolishes time” (122); yet in modernity, after the loss of an overriding unity, time is one and the same with our efforts to wrest meaning out of existence. As the genre of modernity, the novel cannot therefore be divorced from the issue of temporality. Lukács continues: “Nur im Roman, dessen Stoff das Suchenmüssen und das Nicht-finden-Können des Wesens ausmacht, ist die Zeit mit der Form mitgesetzt: die Zeit ist das Sichsträuben der bloß lebhaften Organik wider den gegenwärtigen Sinn, das Verharrenwollen des Lebens in der eigenen, völlig geschlossenen Immanenz” (125) / “Only in the novel, whose very matter is seeking and failing to find the essence, is time posited together with the form: time is the resistance of the organic—which possesses a mere semblance of life—to the present meaning, the will of life to remain within its own completely enclosed immanence” (122).

One might object that plot need not be just the plot of a novel, that it can also be studied in Lukács’s atemporal epics. However, for the purposes of our study, plot is the design and intention that cuts across fabula and sjužet, a “dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse”
and thus one that is, on the one hand, linked to temporality, and, on the other, to the impulse—regardless of its outcome—to ascribe meaning to events that unfold through time. At this point, having established plot as armature the initial task of which is to mark off a beginning and an end, we can also see how closely related it is to the issue of temporality and time-boundedness. Moreover, it is only in time, and more importantly, through time, that we understand. Returning to our earlier remarks, to plot means to fill things with an intent. This is one of the tasks that Lukács ascribes to the novel. Curiously, he sees it as a sort of residue from the age of the epic, so that even though “die extensive Totalität des Lebens nicht mehr sinnfällig gegeben ist … [ein Zeitalter] das dennoch die Gesinnung zur Totalität hat” (53) / “the extensive totality of life is no longer given … [our age] still thinks in terms of totality” (56). Whether our incessant need to create fictions and extract meaning from them is truly the residue of an earlier age, as Lukács’s nostalgic study suggests, is doubtless beyond the scope of our study. What counts is that such a tendency exists, and that, regardless of our awareness of its fictive status, we continue to engage in it.

The act of plotting is tasked, like most of our interpretive activities, with finding a beginning. Out of all of Ferrante’s novels, L’amica geniale most patently depicts this inceptive search. The novel begins with the disappearance of Raffaella Cerullo. Elena Greco, famed author and lifelong friend of Raffaella, promptly understands that her friend is not in danger. Lila, as she has called her ever since they became friends, has simply vanished after decades of wishing to do so. She has erased all traces of her existence from this world, a self-effacing gesture that her friend interprets as an investiture of sorts, as she takes up the task of writing the story of their friendship. At the beginning, then, writing is posited as a palimpsestic act, raising the question whether Elena is writing for, to, with, or over Lila. Such prepositional acrobatics are not meant to
confuse, but rather to illuminate the often contradictory impulses that initiate, advance, and end the narration. That all of these impulses\(^\text{10}\) are thematized in the narration is evident, as is their fluctuating relevance—at times the elegiac will take precedence, at times the odic, at others these will give way to a strong wish for collaborative writing, which often will turn out to be a subterfuge for palimpsestic impulses.

This palimpsestic function is mainly attributable to the embedded narrative, or the story of Lila and Elena’s friendship, which constitutes the bulk of the novel. The prologue and epilogue make up the embedding narrative and are a mere five chapters combined. There are, therefore, at least two levels of plot, each with a corresponding beginning and end: first comes, we might say, Ferrante’s beginning, the novel’s opening, which then encapsulates Elena’s beginning, or the moment where she chooses to mark the genesis of her and Lila’s friendship. In a way, both are Ferrante’s beginnings, or, conversely, Elena’s, depending on how one looks at it, yet this distinction of levels will help clarify some of the remarks we will make about plot structure and the ways in which plotting itself is thematized in the novel.

Our first question is: How does Elena Greco plot her friendship with Lila? Brooks astutely claims that “narrative ever, and inevitably … presents itself as a repetition and rehearsal” and as a “going over again of a ground already covered” (25). This retrospective dimension is made explicit in \textit{L’amica geniale} in the transition from embedding to embedded narrative, which opens with a scene in which the interesting relationship between space and

\(^{10}\) Desire would be another way to term the initiatory force behind the act of narration. I choose \textit{impulse} for the implications of motion, its root meaning “push” in Latin. Thus, whatever force pushes the act of narration forward (even if its glance is backward); its presence can be structural or thematic. This choice might also be a way of bypassing the psychoanalytic territory into which \textit{desire} would inevitably take us. However, I am still very interested in the illuminating work that has been done around the issue of narrative desire, especially by Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, Adriana Cavarero, Teresa de Lauretis, and René Girard. Each of their conceptions of desire has in some way informed mine, and in the following pages I will have the opportunity to refer to them.
plotting expressed in Brooks’s metaphoric ground acquires a literal value. I am, of course, referring to the moment when, at age eight, Elena and Lila ascend the steps to Don Achille’s house. It seems more than appropriate that just as the two girls are in search of a plot, they are also literally making their way through a plot of land, one that is, not coincidentally, forbidden.\footnote{In \textit{Reading for the Plot}, Brooks refers to different definitions of plot and the ways in which they can be related. Plot as narrative, plot as space, and plot as complot are all relevant conceptualizations, and it is easy to see how they intersect in the inceptive scene of \textit{L’amica geniale}.} The narration will return to this originary moment time and again, performing both, in Brook’s terms, a repetition and, as it were, a rehearsal.\footnote{Can we speak of the “retrospection of preemption” here, as in “One Art”? Both Elena and Lila look back on this moment as a mistake. Lila says, at some point: “Facemmo male: a partire da quel momento ho sempre sbagliato tutto” (SNC 46) / “We were wrong: ever since that moment I’ve been wrong about everything” (SNN 46). Could the narration’s constant return to that moment function as a doomed attempt to either reproduce a moment and change it or to prepare for the inevitable course of events set in motion by the ascent?} This is a moment that resurfaces not only in the middle, but also at the very end of the story.

Because it is our conviction that ends always have something to say about beginnings, I would like to put aside the ascension of the stairs and instead turn to the moment that leads to this ascension (even if it succeeds it in the \textit{sjužet}), not as it is first presented, but as it is revisited at the end of the novel.\footnote{Frequency, as conceived by Genette, is a valuable term in our understanding of the Quartet’s constant revisitation of certain originary moments. If we borrow the term, it is not simply to uncover the mechanics of Elena’s storytelling, but rather to investigate how each successive revisitation alters the valence of the “original” scene—how, according to the retrospective model, the end affects everything that came before it, allowing for the possibility that the “original” is the last, not the first, occurrence.} That is, the moment when Lila throws Elena’s doll down into a cellar.\footnote{This event is an excellent example of repetitive frequency, insofar as it only happens once but is narrated multiple times. The ascension to Don Achille’s house, on the other hand, can be representative of repetitive frequency (when the narration returns to that particular moment in 1953) but also of multiple frequency (every time, later in life, that Lila and Elena ascend the same stairs). In both cases, our retrospective model applies.} Anticipating a later discussion of Genette’s \textit{arbitraire}, and keeping in mind the destabilizing force of ends, I would like to advance the following question about Lila’s action: \textit{to what end?}
Drawing on the several meanings of the word *end*, the question can be reformulated in the following ways:

1) *For what purpose does Lila throw Elena’s doll?* This version enters us into the psychology of the characters; i.e. “Lila era una bambina molto cattiva” (AG 50) / “Lila was mean” (MBF 54).

2) *To what end, as outcome or result, does this action lead?* Implicit when I wrote of “the moment that leads to this ascension,” this version speaks of more orthodox conceptions of plot and causality;¹⁵ i.e. Lila and Elena must ascend the steps to Don Achille’s house as a result of Lila’s actions: “Era stata colpa sua. In un tempo non troppo distante ... mi aveva preso la bambola a tradimento e l’aveva buttata in fondo a uno scantinato” (AG 25) / “It was her fault. Not too long before ... she had treacherously taken my doll and thrown her down into a cellar” (MBF 29). Notice here an interesting connection between *colpa* and causality.

3) *To what end, as conclusion or destruction, does this action tend?* A variation of 2), except the focus here is on the final outcome, on metaphor rather than metonymy. This version invests the end with a gravitational force capable of pulling everything toward it;¹⁶ i.e. the ways in which the loss of the dolls prefigures more considerable losses: “Ciò che le toccò in sorte, e che forse era in agguato nella sua vita da sempre...” (SBP 321) / “What befell her, what had perhaps been lying in wait in her life forever...” (SLC 339).

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¹⁵ Specifically, Forster’s, which interprets story as succession and plot as causation.

¹⁶ This is what Brooks interprets as the death instinct. This tendency toward the end is, for him, “the drive of living matter to return to the quiescence of the inorganic” (51). As with desire, I hesitate to adopt Brooks’s vocabulary because it would entail having to incorporate a psychoanalytic framework to our study.
For what purpose, in the economy of the text, does Lila throw Elena’s doll? This will become clearer when we discuss Genette’s notion of the arbitraire, but it means something along the lines of: Lila throws the doll so what else can happen?

Deceptively similar to 2) and 3), except that here we have arrived at a destabilization of the very concept of narrative causality.

Let us turn to the loss of the dolls as revisited at the end to better understand how each of these variations plays out in the novel. In the last chapter of the embedded narrative, Elena attributes the end of her friendship with Lila to the publication of her latest book, Un’amicizia, a short novel that told the friends’ story and used the disappearance of Tina as a focal point. After its publication, Elena writes, Lila ceased to respond to her calls, ostensibly because in writing Un’amicizia, Elena broke the promise she made to Lila never to write about her. “Così,” Elena writes, “ho dovuto prendere atto che la nostra amicizia era finita” (SBP 443) / “So I had to acknowledge that our friendship was over” (SLC 464).

Some remarks are in order. First, Elena’s text is bookended by ignored interdictions: on the one end, the little girls ascend the steps to Don Achille’s house fully knowing that their parents have forbidden them to do so; on the other, in writing Un’amicizia, Elena has brazenly ignored Lila’s injunction. Second, the assumption that L’amica geniale is the story of Elena and Lila’s friendship is called into doubt by the fact that Elena dates the end of their friendship to 2007, well before she begins to write the story that we

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17 Macsimowicz interprets the doll episode as a reenactment of Immacolata’s failure to recognize Elena’s subjectivity. She writes: “Winnicott equates the psychic state created in the child with the experience of being ‘dropped,’ precisely what Elena and Lila literally reenact through their dolls. When Lila drops Elena’s doll Tina through the grates of the cellar and into what appears a terrifying abyss, she mirrors Immacolata’s dropping of Elena” (212). Lila, however, does not drop Elena’s doll; she throws it. I engage in this seemingly fastidious correction because in the slippage between the two words gets lost the issue of agency and colpa, which are so crucial to the act of plotting. The act of dropping leaves room for accident; the act of throwing underscores plotting and Lila’s much-referred-to cattiveria.
are reading. This somewhat irregular chronology suggests that rather than simply being the story of a friendship, *L’amica geniale* is, instead, the story of Lila’s disappearance.

How do these two different ways of reading alter our interpretation of the beginning and middle of the story? Narratively, were this strictly the story of a friendship, it would have made of anything after 2007 an addendum. On the other hand, were this the story of Lila’s disappearance, we would be inclined to read certain events as foreshadowing. And not only, for we would be prone to see the entire plot as *tending* toward that ending. This finds an echo in the moment when, writing of Lila’s pain after the disappearance of Tina, Elena suggests that what happened to Lila had been “lying in wait in her life forever.” Elena speaks not strictly in terms of “what happened to Lila,” or, as Goldstein translates it, “what befell her,” but rather of “ciò che le toccò in sorte” and thus of her destiny or fate. This destiny, rather than being the manifestation of a divine masterplot, instead provides valuable commentary on our reading habits and our tendency to construct meaning out of the willful ordering of events into a plot. In other words, whatever had been hiding in Lila’s life, waiting to come to fruition and thus complete her fate, is a figure for the narrative exercise of grasping a “text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the metonymies that have led to it” (108). Already this speaks not of *our* interpretive activity, but of Elena’s, who, in writing Lila’s life, has decided to order it.

We come to a crossroads, however, in the recognition of three asymmetrical levels of narrative: the writing of *Un’amicizia*, the writing of “Elena’s text” or the embedded narrative, and *L’amica geniale* itself. It is perhaps impossible to come to a neat separation of these three levels, but it is important to keep them in mind in trying to understand the critique of plot and reading that Ferrante is advancing here. *Un’amicizia* is clearly a *mise en abyme* of the text we are reading, and had we not been told that the novel is no longer than eighty pages, we would be
inclined to read *L’amica geniale* as a sort of postmodernist text fated to bend on itself.\(^{18}\) Ferrante encourages this slippage between the texts, as primarily evidenced in what Elena tells us about *Un’amicizia*. The passage is worth quoting at length:

*Un’amicizia* aveva di buono, secondo me, che era lineare. Raccontava in sintesi, con tutti i travestimenti del caso, le nostre due vite, dalla perdita delle bambole alla perdita di Tina. In cosa avevo sbagliato? Ho pensato a lungo che se la fosse presa perché nella parte finale, anch'è se ricorrendo più che in altri punti della storia alla fantasia, raccontavo ciò che di fatto era accaduto nella realtà: Lila aveva valorizzato Imma agli occhi di Nino e nel farlo si era distratta, perdendo di conseguenza Tina. Ma evidentemente ciò che nella finzione del racconto serve in tutta innocenza ad arrivare al cuore dei lettori, diventa un’infamia per chi avverte l’eco dei fatti che ha realmente vissuto. (*SBP* 443)

*A Friendship* had the quality, in my opinion, of being linear. It told concisely, with the necessary disguises, the story of our lives, from the loss of the dolls to the loss of Tina. Where had I gone wrong? I thought for a long time that she was angry because, in the final part, although resorting to imagination more than at other points of the story, I related what in fact had happened in reality: Lila had given Imma more importance in Nino’s eyes, in doing so had been distracted, and as a result lost Tina. But evidently what in the fiction of the story serves in all innocence to reach the heart of the reader becomes an abomination for one who feels the echo of the facts she has really lived. In other words

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\(^{18}\) Although I disagree with Santovetti that both texts are the same (if anything because of their length), I quite like that she refers to this as a “short circuit”: “il brano, insomma, fa cortocircuito e ci fa vedere come il racconto finzionale di Elena Greco … e il romanzo scritto nella realtà da Elena Ferrante … coincidano” (“Lettura” 188) / “the passage, in fact, creates a short-circuit, and prompts us to note how Elena Greco’s fictional story … and the novel written by Elena Ferrante in reality… correspond” (my translation).
I thought for a long time that what had assured the book’s success was also what had hurt Lila most. (SLC 465)

Let’s round up what we know about this little book that plays such a big role in the novel. Elena attributes to it the quality of being “linear,” a word that suggests a sequence of events neatly ordered, a word that in Italian also means coherent and consistent. It comes as a surprise that Elena values the linear quality of Un’amicizia, especially after she has continuously referred to the “tangled” nature of human relationships. During one of her visits to Nella in Barano (as she has left Lila to consolidate her adultery with Nino), she thinks: “Ah, se fosse stato tutto così lineare. Ma sapevo già – anche se non come lo so oggi – che tra noi due tutto era più aggrovigliato” (SNC 286) / “Ah, if it were all so straightforward. But I already knew—although not the way I do today—that between the two of us everything was more tangled” (SNN 286).

Anche se non come lo so oggi. The formulation causes a divide in consciousness between, on the one hand and locked in the imperfetto, the sixteen-year-old Elena who already acknowledges the intricacies of her relationship with Lila, and, on the other, the sixty-six-year-old Elena who claims to have an even deeper understanding of the tangled nature of friendship, ostensibly because experience has granted her this piece of wisdom. Brooks speaks of the wisdom we extract from narrative as a savoir, “knowledge wrested from the doomed dialectic of vouloir and pouvoir, in the transformatory function of narrating itself” (60). Inevitably we ask: has Elena

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19 Ferrante uses the word “lineare” both times, which Goldstein translates as “linear” and “straightforward.”

20 De Lauretis writes of “the very movement of narrative: the unfolding of the Oedipal drama as action at once backward and forward, its quest for (self) knowledge through the realization of loss, to the making good of Oedipus’ sight and the restoration of vision” (Alice 126). On a passing note, this savoir that Brooks speaks of is comparable to the refrain in “One Art,” which is a result of the act of narrating, and, moreover, a type of knowledge that is “by definition always retrospective and too late, or perhaps knowledge of the too-late” (53). So, of course, the issue of retrospection becomes central, even if it cannot allow for preemption.
learned nothing? Granted, the oggi is somewhere between 2010 and 2011, so between three and four years after the publication of Un’amicizia, and yes, Elena writes in the imperfetto “Un’amicizia aveva di buono” (emphasis mine), thus allowing for the possibility that the sixty-six-year-old Elena knows better than her sixty-three-year-old self. Even so, the distinction is too tenuous and the contradiction too obvious to ignore, while Elena is much too perspicacious a narrator to have inadvertently made such a mistake.

We must then ask ourselves what kind of savoir Elena is claiming to have wrested from her narrative—what kind of savoir Elena is wrestling from her narrative, for it is concerned with two levels of narration, and it is, more importantly, concerned with what the text continually presents as the most “tangled” of issues: Elena’s friendship with Lila. The figure of the tangle—garbuglio—occupies a central place in Ferrante’s imaginary, and though not perhaps as related to smarginatura, it is doubtless very close to the concept of frantumaglia. Ferrante goes as far as writing, in La frantumaglia, that they are different names for the same thing: “io la chiamo garbuglio, o meglio frantumaglia” (356) / “I call it a tangle, or, rather, frantumaglia” (366). She also writes: “Preferisco pensarmi all’interno di una matassa ingarbugliata .... Credo che sia necessario raccontare il garbuglio delle esistenze e delle generazioni. Cercare il bandolo è utile, ma la letteratura si fa col garbuglio” (323) / “I prefer to think of myself as being inside a tangled knot; tangled knots fascinate me. It’s necessary to recount the tangle of existence, as it concerns both individual lives and the life of generations. Seeking to unravel things is useful, but literature is made out of tangles” (333). This conscious turn from linearity is both strictly narratological and, I argue, a commentary on stories of female formation, an idea that I borrow from Susan Fraiman’s Unbecoming Women, a study of novels that relate female Bildung. Fraiman’s comments on Evelina seem more than applicable to the Quartet: “Evelina may be a work
revealingly at odds with itself, continuing to invoke and value some ‘masculine’ notion of linear
development, even as another geometry of obstructed female development emerges” (35). I am
particularly interested in this alternative geometry and in the ways in which Ferrante genders it
through the figure of the *garbuglio*.

Before scrutinizing how the *garbuglio* invokes and reconfigures female formation,
however, I would like to turn to the implications it has for narratological conceptions of
causality. Ultimately, we could say that Ferrante is an heiress of Gadda’s don Ciccio, who starkly
rejects the notion of causality:

Sosteneva, fra l’altro, che le inopinate catastrofi non sono mai la conseguenza o l’effetto
che dir si voglia d’un unico motivo, d’una causa al singolare: ma sono come un vortice,
un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo, verso cui hanno cospirato
tutta una molteplicità di causali convergenti. Diceva anche nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio,
o gnommero, che alla romana vuol dire gomitolo. Ma il termine giuridico «le causali, la
causale» gli sfuggiva preferentemente di bocca: quasi contro sua voglia. (6-7)

He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence
or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like
a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards
which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed. He also used words like
knot or tangle, or muddle, or gnommero, which in Roman dialect means skein. But the
legal term, “the motive, the motives,” escaped his lips by preference, though as if against
his will. (5)

Don Ciccio’s conception of the world and causality consolidates our earlier point that
*frantumaglia* is, inasmuch as raw “unorganized” material for the narrative, *fabula*. But it also
speaks of Ferrante’s vision of plot and its illusory sense of causation. In fact, we could say that *Un’amicizia* is the text that Ferrante never would have written, for as Elena tells us, in its linearity it also claims to present “real” events just as they happened, in particular regarding Tina’s disappearance. Elena claims to have recounted in her book what “in fact” happened on the day Tina disappeared, i.e. that Lila “had given Imma more importance in Nino’s eyes, in doing so had been distracted, and as a result lost Tina.” But, we repeat, Elena should know better. Attributing the loss of Tina to Lila’s inadvertence is certainly no more than an interpretation of events and anything *but* inadvertent on Elena’s part. Grammatically, Elena is placing the agency of the loss on Lila and imposing on the events an illusory sense of causality: “perdendo *di conseguenza* Tina.” She is, in short, allocating culpability.

We find here another indication of the hazy relationship between *colpa* and causality mentioned before. How, we ask, can Elena impose this sense of causality on her friend, when the *savoir* of her narrative has explicitly warned her against such things? When, more important, Lila has warned her against such things:

> Ti posso far notare una cosa? Usi sempre *vero e veramente*, sia quando parli che quando scrivi. Oppure dici: *all’improvviso*. Ma quando mai la gente parla *veramente* e quando mai le cose succedono *all’improvviso*? Lo sai meglio di me che è tutto un imbroglio e che a una cosa ne segue un’altra e un’altra ancora. Io non faccio più niente *veramente*, Lenù. E alle cose ho imparato a starci attenta, solo i cretini credono che succedono *all’improvviso*. *(SFR 289)*

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21 This partial exchange of daughters is one of many repetitions of the original exchange in the novel: the exchange of the dolls—the fact that Lila throws Elena’s doll down to the basement, and Elena Lila’s, later recalled as they promise to exchange children if Lila has another boy.

22 Note that Tina’s disappearance is often spoken of in terms of “loss” (*la bambina perduta*), returning us to the scenario of Bishop’s speaker
May I point out something? You always use *true* and *truthfully*, when you speak and when you write. Or you say: *unexpectedly*. But when do people ever speak *truthfully* and when do things ever happen *unexpectedly*? You know better than I that it’s all a fraud and that one thing follows another and then another. I don’t do anything *truthfully* anymore, Lenù. And I’ve learned to pay attention to things. Only idiots believe that they happen *unexpectedly*. (TLS 317)

A poignant irony, certainly, that Lila professes her attention to things, when Elena attributes the loss of Tina to her lack of attention. Note, too, that Lila uses the word *imbrogl.io* (another word for tangle). She is, as I will argue later, the novel’s central figure of entanglement and the novel’s central locus of Fraiman’s alternative geometry. But to return to Elena, if the *savoir* is clearly in the text, but is somehow being ignored, another possibility suggests itself. Could “perdendo *di conseguenza* Tina” be a form of causal violence, a revengeful *post hoc ergo propter hoc*? Is it possible that Elena is in fact punishing her friend for something that happened over half a century ago?23 The inaugural moment of Elena’s text, and therefore of her friendship with Lila, is given way, as we have said, by the doll incident. Though seemingly buried for over fifteen hundred pages, the incident perpetually hovers over the text. We also learn of the traumatic effects it has for Elena: “Provai un dolore insopportabile. Tenevo alla mia bambola di celluloide come alla cosa più preziosa che avessi” (AG 50) / “I felt an unbearable sorrow. I was attached to my plastic doll; it was the most precious possession I had” (MBF 54).

Losing her doll throws Elena into a state of mind that very closely resembles Lila’s episodes of *smarginatura*.24 It becomes clear in the narrative that this moment marks Elena and

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23 De Lauretis provocingly asks in *Alice Doesn’t*: “Are we to infer that sadism is the causal agent, the deep structure, the generative force of narrative?” (103).
24 de Rogatis also recognizes an instance of *smarginatura* here, and writes: “Ma se Lila battezza l’incredibile esperienza, ancor prima di lei l’amica l’ha vissuta, senza però aver le coraggio di darle un
somehow initiates her into a new stage of life. She writes: “Fu un malessere resistente, forse durò anni, fin oltre la prima adolescenza” (AG 53) / “It was an enduring malaise, lasting perhaps years, beyond early adolescence” (MBF 57). Knowing this, and knowing the sense of deep-seated rivalry that prevailed in their friendship, is it not possible that Elena is taking revenge for the loss of her doll, not by making Tina disappear in reality (or in the reality of the novel), but by making her disappear as much as it is in her power, namely narratively, and by blaming her disappearance on Lila? An eye for an eye—a daughter for a daughter? This would be one way of accounting for Elena’s disingenuous claim that what made her book good was its linearity. It would also entail that the savoir of Un’amicizia is counterfeit, that even though Elena admittedly recounts “con i travestimenti del caso,” chance is really just an accessory in her story, for what in fact governs her narrative is the impulse to punish Lila. The mark of the counterfeit is of course ubiquitous in the Quartet, inextricably bound to the episode of the dolls and to the other person who occupies the most important place in the episode: Don Achille. Just like Don Achille and the corruption associated with him will prove to be a pervasive undercurrent in the novel, intermittently resurfacing and tirelessly following the friends’ lives, the sense of animosity that Elena develops for Lila, though stifled, is bound to come back and guide her, marking a friendship that turned out to be rotten before it flourished.

Thus, the foremost power that Elena wields is narrative. In this sense, it is important that all of Ferrante’s novels are written in the first person, and, moreover, that, as Ferrante states in La frantumaglia, “l’io narrante nelle mie storie non è mai una voce monologante, ma scrittura”

nome” (Parole 1214) / “But if Lila baptizes the incredible experience, her friend has lived it even before her, without, however, having the courage to name it” (my translation). The question remains: why doesn’t Elena name her state? 25 That the dolls represent daughters to the young Lila and Elena is evident. Elena writes that, to her, the doll was alive, and later she talks remembers playing “a fare le mamme delle nostre bambole” (SBP 144) / “at being mothers with our dolls” (SLC 157).
"The narrating ‘I’ in my stories is never a voice giving a monologue; she is writing” (266). Writing is, therefore, not only the necessary means to tell a story (hence pure communicative tool, a stand-in for oral transmission), but rather a self-sustaining, highly mediated form that often is at the service of exerting one’s power over the other.

If we posit that Elena is not as ignorant of the workings of her narration as we might be led to believe, if we posit that she has, in fact, learned something and has decided to use it against Lila, we come to the realization, too, that Elena is very sagacious and that she might, in fact, be ahead of us and already cognizant of the contradictions that populate her text. Indeed, in discussing Lila’s reaction to Un’amicizia, she proceeds to resuscitate the episode of the dolls:

Mi sono convinta che la ragione del suo ritrarsi fosse altrove, nel mio modo di raccontare l’episodio delle bambole. Avevo esagerato ad arte il momento in cui erano sparite nel buio dello scantinato, avevo potenziato il trauma della perdita, e per ottenere effetti commoventi avevo usato il fatto che una delle bambole e la bambina scomparsa portavano lo stesso nome. Il tutto aveva indotto programmaticamente i lettori a connettere la perdita infantile delle figlie finte alla perdita adulta della figlia vera. Lila doveva aver trovato cinico, disonesto, che fossi ricorsa a un momento importante della nostra infanzia, alla sua bambina, al suo dolore, per compiacere il mio pubblico. (SBP 443-44)

I’m convinced that the reason for her repudiation lay elsewhere, in the way I recounted the episode of the dolls. I had deliberately exaggerated the moment when they disappeared into the darkness of the cellar, I had accentuated the trauma of the loss, and to intensify the emotional effects I had used the fact that one of the dolls and the lost child had the same name. The whole led the reader, step by step, to connect the childhood
loss of the pretend daughters to the adult loss of the real daughter. Lila must have found it
cynical, dishonest, that I had resorted to an important moment of our childhood, to her
child, to her sorrow, to satisfy my audience. (SLC 465)
Repeatedly in the novel, the subject of the dolls comes up in relation, however subtle and
seemingly unimportant, to Tina and Imma, yet here, for the first time, Elena recognizes the role
that those two incidents played in Un’amicizia and recognizes, further, that it is only through the
inner workings of plot that those two events as metonymy can be totalized into metaphor. A most
disconcerting mise en abyme, given that in confessing to have deliberately exaggerated the
episode of the dolls and the ensuing trauma in Un’amicizia, Elena is all but confessing to having
done the same in her text, on the second level of narrative. The third level of narration does not
emerge unscathed from this consideration, either: is Elena’s confession a proxy for Ferrante’s
own confession of the arbitrariness of her association of the dolls to the loss of Tina in L’amica
geniale? She has, in fact, stated that the building blocks of the Quartet were precisely those two
events: “Sapevo con chiarezza cosa avrei raccontato: un’amicizia che comincia col gioco perfido
delle bambole e si esaurisce con la perdita di una figlia” (La frantumaglia 270) / “I knew clearly
the story I would tell: a friendship that begins with the treacherous game of the dolls and ends
with the loss of a daughter” (280).

This seems to me a particularly important point. In exploring the issue of the arbitrary
relation between the dolls and the daughters, Genette’s concept of the arbitraire du récit can be
of much help:

Ces déterminations rétrogrades constituent précisément ce que nous appelons
l’arbitraire du récit, c’est-à-dire non pas du tout l’indétermination, mais la détermination
des moyens par les fins, et, pour parler plus brutalement, des causes par les effets. (18)
La motivation est donc l’apparence et l’alibi causaliste que se donne la détermination finaliste qui est la règle de la fiction: le parce que chargé de faire oublier le pour quoi? — et donc de naturaliser, ou de réaliser (au sens de: faire passer pour réelle) la fiction en dissimulant ce qu’elle a de concerté, comme dit Valincour, c’est-à-dire d’artificiel. (19-20)

These retrospective determinations constitute precisely what we call the arbitrariness of narrative, not really indeterminacy, in other words, but the determination of means by ends and, to put it more crudely, of causes by effects.

Motivation then is the causalist appearance and alibi that is given to the finalist determination that is the rule of fiction: the because appointed to make one forget the why? — and so to naturalize, or to realize (in the sense of: to make pass for real) fiction while dissimulating what has been “pre-arranged” in it, as Valincour says, in other words what is artificial—fictive, in short. (252-53)

Genette’s notion of the arbitraire du récit provides us with an alternative to Brooks’s retrospective model that, I think, better accommodates the punitive and manipulative dimension of retrospection. It allows us to understand how Elena’s keen awareness of having exaggerated the connection between the lost dolls and the lost daughter casts doubt on Un’amicizia and consequently pulls the fictional rug from under the entire novel. She has, in Formalist terms, “laid bare” the device of the novel and unveiled whatever seemed to have led Tina and Lila to disappear, and Elena to where she is, as nothing more than what the Formalists and Genette respectively term motivacija and motivation. She has brought down any sense of dissimulation
and called out any textual motivation as a trick that artistically (and, therefore, deceitfully)\textsuperscript{26} renders the middle relevant or causal. This avowal toward the end is a serious destabilization that forces us to recognize the artificiality of literary creation, as well as the fact that everything in the middle has not led to, but rather been arbitrarily subordinated to the end—the cause, as Genette would have it, to the effect. I find this to be a somewhat shocking avowal to come after 1700 pages, and a particularly deceitful one at that, since it breaks the novelistic pact that had offered us the faithful account of a friendship. In the economy of the text, and according to Genette’s conception of functionality, Lila throws the dolls so that Tina can be lost (thus, answer 4 to the question to what end?). A cruel interpretation, certainly, one that highlights the arbitrariness of the author’s power over the text and simultaneously advances a critique of plot, an attack on the epistemology of fictional creation. We cannot but get a sense that we are being duped. We hear the tenuous voice of an author in the words of Lila: “vi imbroglio tutti” / “I’ll cheat you all.”

Moreover, while Elena dates the end of her friendship with Lila to 2007, when Un’amicizia was published, Ferrante’s statement suggests otherwise. She writes that her purpose was to tell of a friendship that begins with the wicked game of the dolls—and in this we find evidence for our assertion that at the inception of the friendship lies an act of treachery—and ends with the loss of a daughter. Must we therefore alter our previous statements to say that L’amica geniale is not the story of a friendship, nor the story of Lila’s disappearance, but the story of Tina’s disappearance? Is that the ultimate event signaled by the beginning and toward which the middle is tending? It is important to reiterate that our treatment of Tina’s disappearance here is narrative, for if the energy (in the form of resentment) released by the

\textsuperscript{26} I have often wondered if this trickery could be understood in terms of a menzogna e sortilegio, that is, as the narrative spell that turns events into plotted lies. I use the Italian terms given Ferrante’s avowed admiration for Morante’s novel.
incident of the dolls is balanced by the retributive act of making Tina disappear and faulting Lila for it, then we can appreciate how the plot is, as it were, balanced or evened out, making Brooks’s assertion a correct one: “we can see that in any well-plotted novel the energies released and aroused in the text, especially in its early moments, will not be lost” (123). We understand textual energy to be whatever sense of conflict, tension, or mystery arises from an event in the text, minimal as it may be.27 As the main property behind its dynamic shaping force, textual energy is essential to plot; it is synonymous with impulse in that it pushes the narrative forward yet different from it insofar as impulse carries with it connotations of intention, which is certainly the case on a thematic level, while energy is more concerned with textual transformations on the structural level, bringing us closer to the metabolic model that we will put forward in the following pages.

Thus, we can start to understand the occasional resurfacing of the dolls. They are mentioned in the first volume, then in one episode at the beginning and very briefly at the end of the second volume, once briefly in the third volume, and several times in the fourth. That the fourth volume constitutes a return comes as no surprise; it is the volume most marked by returns to and returns of. This repetition-as-return formalizes the energy released by the initial incident of the dolls and allows us to connect them to Tina and Imma.28 Not coincidentally, the dolls are mentioned in exactly three different instances in the last volume, before Tina’s disappearance: the first time, at the gynecologist’s office, when Elena reminds Lila that she threw Tina into the

27 Brooks: “the text is a kind of thermodynamic plenum, obeying the law of the conservation of energy (as well, no doubt, as the law of entropy). Repetition is clearly a major operative principle of the system, shaping energy, giving it perceptible form, form that the text and the reader can work with in the construction of thematic wholes and narrative orders” (123).

28 Brooks: “Textual energy, all that is aroused into expectancy and possibility in a text, can become usable by plot only when it has been bound or formalized” (101).
cellar, prompting Elena to do the same to Nu;\textsuperscript{29} the second time, at the clinic, when Alfonso recollects the doll episode and confesses to Elena that his father accused him of stealing them;\textsuperscript{30} the third, after the birth of Tina and Imma, when Elena remarks that Lila gave Tina the name of her doll. Interestingly, while this last episode happens just some months after the first, Lila fails to remember the dolls both times. Clearly, Elena’s memory is more capacious in its resentment.\textsuperscript{31}

This, as it were, incantatory trebling ensures that the loss of the daughter will be tied to the loss of the dolls. Nor is it coincidental that the dolls resurface three times, for, as Brooks states, “repetition by three constitutes the minimal repetition to the perception of series, which would make it the minimal intentional structure of action, the minimum plot” (99). We sense the plotting mind of Elena behind this structuring of the events, made evident in the words that Lila uses to respond to the observation that she gave Tina the name of Elena’s doll: “non l’ho fatto apposta” (\textit{SBP} 204) / “I didn’t do it on purpose” (\textit{SLC} 219). A formulation that brings us back to the first volume, specifically to the episode of the class competition involving Elena, Lila, Nino, Alfonso, and, unexpectedly, Enzo. Reflecting on Lila’s victory, Elena writes:

\begin{quote}
Ma la cosa più importante di quella mattinata fu la scoperta che una formula che usavamo spesso per sottrarci alle punizioni custodiva qualcosa di vero, quindi di ingovernabile, quindi di pericoloso. La formula era: \textit{non l’ho fatto apposta}. Enzo infatti si era inserito
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Nu, the name of Lila’s doll, seems to me an evident shortening of Nunzia, the name of Lila’s mother. Given that Tina, the name of Elena’s doll, cannot be a diminutive of Immacolata, can it be a variation of Lina (the name that everyone \textit{but} Elena calls Lila?). Or is it simply an evident and arbitrary literary device to link doll to daughter and do to Lila’s daughter what Lila did to Elena’s doll?

\textsuperscript{30} This particular scene seems to rule out the possibility that the dolls made their way back to Lila through Alfonso. Had Alfonso taken the dolls, would he have not confessed it to Elena at this moment? Again, this accentuates the destabilizing inexplicability of the return of the dolls.

\textsuperscript{31} “Plot,” writes Forster, “demands intelligence and memory also” (131). Forster’s study of the novel is fascinating, even if at times also quite off the mark: “You will have noticed in daily life that when people are inquisitive they nearly always have bad memories and are usually stupid at bottom” (131). Leaving off intelligence to the side, I am interested in memory. Could Lila’s lack of good memory—referred to several times in the narrative—be a representation of her inadequacy to orthodox conceptions of plot? Moreover, could Elena’s memory be instrumental to her use of plot as a tool for revenge?
non di proposito nella gara in atto e non di proposito aveva sconfitto Alfonso. Lila di proposito aveva sconfitto Enzo ma non di proposito aveva sconfitto anche Alfonso e non di proposito lo aveva umiliato, era stato solo un passaggio necessario. I fatti che ne derivarono ci convinsero che non fare le cose apposta serviva a poco, che conveniva fare apposta tutto, premeditatamente, in modo da sapere quello che c’era da aspettarsi. (AG 48)

But the most important thing that morning was the discovery that a phrase we often used to avoid punishment contained something true, hence uncontrollable, hence dangerous. The formula was: I didn’t do it on purpose. Enzo, in fact, had not entered the competition deliberately and had not deliberately defeated Alfonso. Lila had deliberately defeated Enzo but had not deliberately defeated Alfonso or deliberately humiliated him; it had been only a necessary step. The conclusion we drew from this convinced us that it was best to do everything on purpose, deliberately, so that you would know what to expect.

(MBF 52)

This passage can be read as an ars poetica on the necessities of plot. If we understand intention and design to be constitutive of plot, fare qualcosa apposta / to do something on purpose is itself a form of plotting. That Elena associates the formula non l’ho fatto apposta with something ingovernabile\(^{32}\) seems in line with the impulse to exert control over a story by deliberately...

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\(^{32}\) Elsewhere in the novel, Elena will refer to Lila’s head as sgovernata when examining the logo—“a swirl around a vertical line”—that her friend creates for Basic Sight. As the following chapter will examine, I take this squiggle to be a figure of Lila’s character and, by extension, of Fraiman’s alternative “geometry of obstructed female development.” That the squiggle is imposed on a vertical line goes to show how Lila resists linear conceptions of plotting. About translation, a brief note: “ingovernabile” is best translated as “ungovernable.” Goldstein translates it as “uncontrollable.” Interestingly, in the passage of the logo, Goldstein turns the past participle “sgovernata” (from sgovernare) into an adjective: “ungovernable.” Far from intending to be pedantic, I think it is important to note the common root of both terms. Both passages present instances of defiance against traditional forms of plotting and reformulate plot as a form of governing (emphasizing the
placing it within certain plotted boundaries. The lack of intention, if understood temporally, constitutes the realm of the pre-plotted, or, in other words, the *fabula*; if understood spatially, it is whatever lies beyond the margins of plot. The following chapter will gauge just how much we can infer about the coordinates of this unplotted space and how related it is to Ferrante’s concept of *frantumaglia*.

Having witnessed the events set in motion by the class competition, Elena comes to the conclusion that “conveniva fare apposta tutto, premeditatamente, in modo da sapere quello che c’era da aspettarsi” / “it was best to do everything on purpose, deliberately, so that you would know what to expect.” A few things stand out. First, the association of plot with premeditation, an association attenuated in translation, highlights the more sinister aspects behind Elena’s writing. Second, and more importantly, “premeditation” lays stress not only on the illicit but also on the idea that the intention behind the organizational drive is ultimately subordinated to the end, that rather than being subject to life’s randomness, it is better to anticipate, better take matters into one’s hands so as to “know what to expect.” To plot is not just to plan, but to plan ahead. In stating that she did not give her daughter the name of Elena’s doll on purpose, is Lila making evident her dissociation from this conception of plot? And is Elena, on the other hand, making evident her association with it by highlighting the connection repeatedly? What do we make, however, of Dede’s assertion that Lila lost Tina “apposta” (*SBP* 334)? Dede is definitely perspicacious in noting some sort of intention behind the disappearance of Tina; nevertheless, it would seem that she has misplaced this intention and attributed to Lila what in fact betrays Elena’s authority.

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author/authority connection) and controlling. The palliative aspects of plot are derived precisely this quality, its capacity to govern, or hold in check, the “ungovernable” and “dangerous,” or, in other words, the *frantumaglia*. 
Before we proceed any further, a word on what I have just called Elena’s authority, or, in other words, her unreliability, which many critics tend to bring up. My understanding of Elena’s unreliability hinges on the ways in which the plot she weaves is populated with energies that indicate revenge and, more generally, antagonism—in other words, how her plot is punitive. Elena is not unreliable because she hides certain turns of events from us, as Elisa Gambaro seems to suggest:

scopriamo che proprio la nostra cronista, in apparenza tanto qualificata, è in realtà sommamente inattendibile: l’io narrante evita infatti di intervenire direttamente proprio in alcuni punti cruciali della vicenda, preferendo lasciare campo libero alle impressioni e ai giudizi erronei del sé giovanile. (“Il fascino” 176)

we discover that our chronicler herself, apparently so qualified, is in reality extremely unreliable: the narrating I, in fact, avoids direct intervention precisely during some crucial moments in the story, preferring to leave room for the impressions and misjudgments of her young self. (my translation)

Withholding this kind of information is simply at the service of maintaining a sense of mystery in the novel; Elena does not tell us from the beginning that Donato will assault her, that Nino will cheat on her, that Tina will disappear—not because she is unreliable, but because there would be no story if she did. The very conceit of storytelling is that meaning unfolds over time (and thus over the sjužet), a dictate which precludes that even a narrator who narrates retrospectively lets in on every secret. Perhaps a weakness of storytelling, yet in no way attributable to Ferrante or Greco. In “Point of View and Control of Distance in Emma,” Wayne Booth provides an excellent investigation on the intricate balance between maintaining a sense of mystery and strengthening dramatic irony. He points out that the relationship between the two
aspects is inversely proportional: “The author must, then, choose whether to purchase mystery at
the expense of irony. For many of us Jane Austen's choice here is perhaps the weakest aspect of
this novel” (106).33 Because, as in *Emma*, so much depends on maintaining a sense of mystery,
the Quartet cannot give away its secrets. Or, rather, Elena cannot. We come once again to a
reiteration of her narrative authority.

And if it is precisely this authority that has made sure that the energy released by Lila’s
betrayal is finally bound and discharged (i.e. formalized and resolved) by the disappearance of
Tina—if the text finds its culmination and release in that incident, and if balance has been
achieved, then we must surely come to the following conclusions: that Elena is wrong in dating
the end of her friendship with Lila to 2007 instead of 1984, when Tina disappeared, and that this
novel is ultimately and simultaneously the story of Tina’s disappearance and of Lila and Elena’s
friendship, insofar as the latter is structured by the former. If their friendship has found a
balance, it can thus be done away with, narratively speaking. Here I return to Ferrante’s
statement of her conception of a book that begins with the wicked game of the dolls and ends
with the loss of a daughter. The original Italian is much more telling: “si esaurisce con la perdita
di una figlia.” From the infinitive *esaurire*, the verb would better be translated as “used up” or
“spent,” again signaling to the thermodynamics of narrative.34

But if the friendship, and therefore the story or the energy driving the story, is spent with
“the loss of a daughter,” what to make of the hundred and fifty pages that follow the
disappearance of Tina, the length of which is longer than each of Ferrante’s first three novels?
Surely something must be made of this narrative leftover? I would like to propose that the plot of

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33 Unsurprisingly, and anticipating Ferrante’s critics, Booth treats Austen’s choice of mystery as a
mistake. The Austen / Ferrante comparison is not seamless—*Emma* is narrated in the third person,
increasing the potential for dramatic irony, while the Quartet is narrated in the first person.
34 *Esaurimento* is also the word used to connote either exhaustion or a nervous breakdown.
Elena’s text finds its ultimate release in the disappearance of Tina, and that the last section, *Storia del cattivo sangue*, exhibits a sort of life post-plot. I take this idea from Peter Brooks’s discussion of the ending of *Great Expectations*:

> at the end we have the impression of a life that has outlived plot, renounced plot, been cured of it: life that is left over. What follows the recognition of Magwitch is left over, and any renewal of expectation and plotting—such as a revived romance with Estella—would have to belong to another story. It is with the image of a life bereft of plot, of movement and desire, that the novel most appropriately leaves us. (138)

We see in *Storia del cattivo sangue* a conflation of subplots that never quite develop, as if the narration were flying over these events—many of them quite important—but couldn’t make itself at home in any of them. A premature epilogue, almost. Anticipating a formulation that will be useful to us later on, we might say that these events happen outside the margins of the plot, that the plot itself has become *smarginata* after the disappearance of Tina.

Some of these subplots are:

1) Elsa’s elopement with Rino;

2) The threat of Nadia Galiani;

3) Enzo’s years in prison;

4) Nino’s political journey;

5) The intimate relationship between Imma and Lila;

6) The dissolution of the plot into the city of Naples;

7) Elena’s fear that Lila is writing a work that will outlast hers, which directly contributes to the creation of *Un’amicizia*. 
In truth, the only sturdy impulse behind *Storia del cattivo sangue* is Elena’s desire to surpass her friend and, conversely, her fear that Lila will write a work of art that will prove to be better than all of hers. But before this fear even materializes, we get a conflation of subplots twisted into, to use Ferrante’s term, a tangle, which compounds to the impression that a plot malfunction has followed the event to which the entire narration has been building up.\(^{35}\) It is quite significant that Tina’s disappearance is done away with in one sentence, and indirectly, too, given that the disappearance is alluded to, but never represented. The *Storia* ends: “Non era rimasta sull’asfalto nemmeno una goccia di sangue, niente niente niente. In quel niente si era perso il veicolo, si perse per sempre la bambina” (*SBP* 313) / “On the asphalt not a drop of blood remained, nothing, nothing at all. In that nothing the vehicle was lost, the child was lost forever” (*SLC* 332).\(^{36}\)

This abrupt break\(^{37}\) effected by the disappearance is subsequently transposed into the structure of the novel. The “niente niente niente” that Tina leaves behind, a *niente* that operates as subject, is transformed by Elena in the following sentence into a prepositional phrase in which *niente* is no longer subject, but a marker of spatial determination. It is in that place that Tina gets lost. But where is that *niente*, and does it lie outside the bounds of plot? In fact, one could argue that the single most important event of the entire novel happens *outside* the plot, and that the

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\(^{35}\) A further sign of this might be that, when the volumes were published individually, the fourth was called *Storia della bambina perduta*, like the section that ends with Tina’s disappearance. *Storia del cattivo sangue* would then be an appendix of sorts. The first volume is also divided into two *storie*, but neither of them gives the title to the volume. Of course, this critical observation is somewhat useless, given that Ferrante treats all volumes as one novel, as we have decided to do.

\(^{36}\) Like her mother, Tina leaves no trace. Or, more perversely, her death is only a function for Lila’s disappearance, a way to ensure that Lila will leave no biological trace, since we are told that Rino looks nothing like her: “Lila, nel concepirlo, pareva aver tirato via tutta se stessa” (*SBP* 42) / “Lila, in conceiving him, seemed to have taken away herself entirely” (*SLC* 51).

\(^{37}\) We will discuss Ferrante’s debt to the Sternean strand of the novel in a different chapter. I would, however, like to point out that behind this most Fielding-esque of novels, we constantly find Sterne’s destabilizing influence. This is noticeable in the novel’s treatment of digression and entanglement as represented by Lila, but also in the aposiopetic way in which the plot abruptly breaks off the penultimate *Storia*. *Tristram Shandy* and *L’amica geniale* certainly valorize digression and aposiopesis differently, yet their use of these techniques is analogous in its criticism of plot’s ways of temporalizing.
iterative mood into which the narration falls after Tina’s disappearance is not only a subversion of common narrative crescendo but also a commentary on plot’s ultimate inability to provide semantic closure. Not only do we not see what happens to Tina, but we also never find out what happened to her. The sense of a loss of margins as affect (as per Lila’s experience) is structurally present in the text’s overcoming of plot.38 For pages and pages after Tina’s disappearance, there is at once a sense that so much happens and, at the same time, that nothing happens, that what is being told is a drawn-out denouement to a climax that never occurred.

The next chapter will explore this unbound space that niente refers to. For now, I would like to discuss the conflation of subplots mentioned above. If there is a sense that so much happens in the last Storia, it is because much does happen (decades-worth of events), but it seems as if so little happened because the narration rushes through these events. In Genette’s terms, the narrative time is quite long—over a quarter of a century—while the discourse time is much shorter in comparison to, say, the time the narration spends on recounting, in the second volume, the girls’ vacation in Ischia. The shortening of discourse time is not due, in this case (as it was, for instance, during Elena’s years in Pisa), to the fact that Elena does not deem these events important or relevant to the story of her friendship with Lila, but rather because there is a growing sense that the novelistic scaffolding is crumbling.39 Concomitant to this disintegration is the progressive retreat of Lila’s character. The shocking assertion at the beginning of the third volume made by Elena—“Forse questa è l’ultima volta che racconto di Lila con ricchezza di

38 In fact, during her strongest episode of smarginatura, Lila says: “ah che cos’è il mondo, Lenù, l’abbiamo visto adesso, niente niente niente di cui si possa dire definitivamente: è così” (SBP 162) / “what is the real world, Lenù, nothing, nothing, nothing about which one can say conclusively: it’s like that” (SLC 176)
39 Another significance discrepancy between narrative and discourse time in the novel relates to sex. Rocco Coronato points out that “se Elena descrive l’atto, vuol dire che è rivoltante; se vi allude solo, è magnifico” (119) / “if Elena describes the act, it means it is revolting; if she only alludes to it, it is magnificent” (my translation).
dettagli. In seguito è diventata sempre più sfuggente” (SFR 91) / “This may be the last time I’ll talk about Lila with a wealth of detail. Later on she became more evasive” (TWL 105)—becomes evident towards the end of the Quartet, when even as the friends live in the same building, one’s ceiling the other’s floor, Lila is more and more indescribable and enigmatic—or, as Elena has it, *sfuggente*.

We have stated our adherence to Brooks’s idea of a textual energetics. Along this line of thought, I would like to expand Brook’s model to talk about the metabolism of a text and the set of activities and energetic transformations needed for the textual body to be sustained. Within the metabolic model’s parameters, the process whereby a text releases energy could be read as catabolism, whereas the “binding” that is so crucial to Brook’s—and our—understanding could be read as an anabolic operation. An important point must be made here. Brooks parenthetically asserts that the text obeys “the law of entropy” (123), a statement that finds echo in his discussion of the death drive. For our purposes, textual entropy becomes the threat ever lurking behind the text’s constant metabolic transformations that require energy to keep order. It is a threat insofar as it always seeks to break order and establish chaos (for, as physics teaches us, chaos is much more economical than order) and because metabolism is an expensive activity to maintain. It is not my argument that Elena’s text falls into utter chaos and displays a full form of entropy toward the end, but rather that its metabolic processes display deficiencies that in turn affect the ways in which the plot and the energy released by its events are handled.

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40 Catabolism is the “phase of the metabolism of living bodies which consists in the breaking down of complex organic compounds into simpler ones; destructive metabolism.” (“catabolism”).
41 Anabolism is the “‘ascending’ process in metabolism, in which simpler substances, as nutritive matter, are transformed into more complex ones, and thus built up into the living structure of the organism; constructive metabolism” (“anabolism”). This function, contrary to catabolism, consumes energy.
If I drive Brooks’s notion of textual energetics in this direction, it is because I believe there is something to be gained from exploring the “digestive” dimension of the text, or the ways in which language and plot can flow or how their progress can be halted. Of course, our discussion of order and form—and, by extension, binding and margins—is relevant here insofar as the utter lack of order threatens a breaking down of the textual system. But how do the deficiencies of the Quartet come about? Generally, there are several reasons why metabolism might be altered. Surgery or an accident, for instance, can paralyze the intestine and consequently slow down metabolism.

Other conditions can have the opposite effect. Which is the case of *I giorni dell’abbandono*. Textual evacuations are literalized when Olga defecates in a park, and they are also present in other ways that are not strictly scatological; more specifically, in Olga’s turn to obscene language during her aggressive exchanges with Mario. They extend to the narration itself, for, as the novel progresses, the language of the narration is decomposed, processed, excreted. While necessary, this sort of unrestrained flow also presents a threat, and the need to stabilize the text’s metabolic transformations is made evident in Olga’s constant search to find psychic balance. The accelerated metabolism characteristic of *I giorni* is also present in *L’amore molesto* and *La figlia oscura*. Discharge abounds in these three novels, its role, on the one hand, to signal to the metabolism of grief, and, on the other, to drive home the realization of the body’s materiality and, therefore, its penetrability. The realization of the body-as-rough-matter is always

42 Lucamante describes the process almost in metabolic terms: “Pressure plunges into the body, which reacts in turn by abandoning any cultural guard…. Her bodily reaction forces the change in her language, which, in turn, embodies her emotional wounds by losing control” (106).
coupled with the realization of the body as an expulsion (an incomplete one) from the maternal body, a notion deeply connected to the frantumaglia and to Kristeva’s abject.\footnote{Stiliana Milkova explores these and other aspects of Ferrante’s oeuvre employing disgust as a framework. As she points out “disgust arises when boundaries are transgressed and the prohibited is enacted. It thus signals the slippage of categories, the breakdown of barriers, the collapse of the threshold” (“Mothers” 96). Milkova’s reading is extremely helpful to understand how disgust operates as a disintegrative force and how it is related to Ferrante’s concept of frantumaglia. My reading here, however, is more formal—metaboli-narratological, we could say—whereas Milkova’s is more thematic, illuminative of the ways in which the “disgusting works to reestablish the threshold of repugnance and reinstall a safe vision of femininity” (“Mothers” 106).}

If we look at Tina’s disappearance as a structural accident, we can begin to understand how the text’s metabolic processes bear the brunt of this trauma and are slowed down by it. While I giorni exhibited a diarrheal pace, constipation comes to the forefront in the Storia del cattivo sangue, carrying with it the sign of counterfeit motherhood. Not by chance is Lila’s abdomen the first thing to swell, as if Tina had returned to the quiescence of pre-life, of the pre-narrated. The shock of Tina’s disappearance, its inevitable sense of arrested development, suggests the discarding of a promising plot, the ultimate manifestation of plot gone wrong, of pregnancy-turned-uterine-fibroids.\footnote{Lila’s continuous menstruation is a figure of smarginatura if we consider that blood leaves the boundaries of the body during menstruation (incidentally, too, the typographical phenomenon of smarginatura is translated in English as “bleeding”). After the earthquake, we learn that her feeling of smarginatura is materialized in the fear that, “se lei non stava attenta, se non badava ai margini, tutto se ne andava via in grumi sanguigni di mestruo, in polipi sarcomatosi, in pezzi di fibra giallora” (SBP 162) / “And so if she didn’t stay alert, if she didn’t pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber” (SLC 176). Moreover, while her swollen stomach adjusts to our metabolic model, this pregnancy-turned-uterine-fibroids is also strongly suggestive of a failed (insofar as the pregnancy is not a pregnancy) process of abjection, or what Ferrante calls the “frantumazione originaria.”} Lila’s inflammation is a figure for the impulse of plot to restart, to come back to life and full fruition. As de Rogatis puts it, “il lutto non rielaborabile apre quindi una voragine insidiosa” (Parole 3576) / “the unworkable grief therefore opens an insidious chasm” (my translation). But because resuscitating Tina’s plot is not possible, as it is not possible for Lila to get pregnant with Tina again, the whole venture becomes a figure for
arrested meaning. If Brooks sees narrative desire as “the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence” (103), we instead see Lila’s tumescence as the literalization of a truncated plot:

E un po’ tutto quanto il corpo cominciò a invecchiare, la schiena si incurvò, la pancia le diventò gonfia.

Carmen un giorno usò un’espressione delle sue, disse preoccupata: Tina le si è incistata dentro, gliela dobbiamo togliere. E aveva ragione, bisognava trovare il modo di tornare a far scorrere la storia della bambina. Ma Lila si rifiutava, tutto della figlia era fermo. (SBP 342)

And her whole body began to age, her back was bent, her stomach swelled.

Carmen one day used an expression of her own, she said anxiously: Tina is encysted in her, we have to get her out. And she was right, we had to find a way to flush out the story of the child. (SLC 360-61)

One might very well alter Elena’s phrase: “we had to find a way to flush out the [Story of the Lost Child],” to the extent that the entire story needs to be metabolized and the particular plot of Tina needs to be, as Goldstein translates it, “flush[ed] out.”

In fact, the discharge that should be happening structurally is displaced into Lila’s body, materialized in the constant loss of blood caused by her uterine fibroids. Later, Lila will refer to her hysterectomy as a birth: “esclamò che Tina era uscita di nuovo dalla sua pancia e ora si stava vendicando di tutti, anche di lei” (SBP 355) / “exclaimed that Tina had come out of her belly again and now was taking revenge on everyone, even on her” (LC 374). This is a counterfeit birth, the birth of an avenging ghost, a return of. Like the fairy tale plot, as we will see, Tina’s has been turned on its head. The connection that Elena makes in this case is relevant; she links
her friend’s menstrual blood to the blood shed by the Solara brothers, murdered on the same day that Lila is admitted into the hospital. This murder would have the narrative potential to “revive” the plot and give it a clear sense of direction, yet the incident, as Tina’s disappearance, is left unexplained: a fissure in the text, a crack in the armature of plot. As with Tina, explanations of the brothers’ deaths are transformed into diceria, gossip, a form of collective speech that bypasses the concrete aspects of an explanation. The blurred agency in this case is materialized in the gossip suggesting that the brothers were, in fact, murdered by a nonentity—that they were hit by bullets fired by nobody, flailing their arms “come se fossero stati investiti da effetti senza causa” (SBP 356) / “as if they had been hit by effects without cause” (SLC 374). I’d like to pause briefly on this last description. If plot, as Forster argues, is characterized by a sense of causality,45 then the murder of the Solara brothers stands for the undoing of plot (at least of plot as traditionally conceived) and returns us to the Genettian arbitrary, in its prioritization of effect over causes.

We quote Forster, however, with a grain of salt, knowing, as we hope it has become clear, that Ferrante’s novels actively try to undo all relevance of an illusion of causality in storytelling. Still, that the lack of causality is theatricalized in the murder of the Solara brothers seems to be one of the peak moments of a critique of plot and its traditional associations to causality—a critique most effectively built through the several moments of blurred agency in the text: beginning with the loss of the dolls, followed by Don Achille’s murder and the explosion of the copper pot, on to Lila’s wedding photo bursting in flames, the murder of Manuela Solara followed by her sons’, the disappearance of Tina and Lila, and, finally, the return of the dolls.46

45 “A plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality” (130).
46 Many critics have “filled in the gaps” and resolved some of the text’s mysteries: de Rogatis claims that it is in all probability Gigliola who burns Lila’s wedding photo (Parole 1214); Mazzanti confidently asserts that it is Lila who took the dolls and hid them for years (91); Russo Bullaro asserts that “Alfredo
These moments are destabilizing regardless of how one interprets them. If taken unsuspiciously, they border on the fantastic and, as such, represent a departure from the brand of realism that the Quartet adopts from the beginning (yet another iteration of the broken literary pact). If, on the contrary, they are read suspiciously, then they become manifestations of fiction and “ce qu’elle a de concerté, comme dit Valincour, c’est-à-dire d’artificiel” (Genette 20) / “what has been ‘pre-arranged’ in it, as Valincour says, in other words what is artificial—fictive, in short” (253). This becomes evident in the episode in which the copper pot explodes. Taken literally, this episode would have to constitute an intrusion of the fantastic; however, it is soon adopted by the narration and transformed into the object correlative of Lila’s fear of smarginatura—an intradiegetic leitmotif that Elena interprets thus: “Li, non a caso, quattro anni prima, aveva collocato lo schizzo di sangue sprizzato dal collo di don Achille quando era stato pugnalato. Li ora aveva deposto quella sua sensazione di minaccia” (AG 226) / “On them, not coincidentally, four years earlier, she had placed the blood that spurted from the neck of Don Achille when he was stabbed. On them now she had deposited that sensation of threat” (MBF 31). The exploding copper pot is therefore in a sort of literary limbo between the figural and the literal, a tension that lays bare the artificiality of Elena’s text. This is a significant issue and a contentious one among scholars. de Rogatis writes of a “realismo magico del Meridione” (Parole 396) / “magical realism of the South” (my translation) linking L’amica geniale and Menzogna e sortilegio, a claim that I dispute, for while the term might be aptly attached to Morante’s work, applying it to the Quartet normalizes (or contextualizes) these occurrences, diminishing the impact that they

Peluso murdered Don Achille” (“The Era” 22). By “unblurring” the agency behind these mysteries, these critics are treating L’amica geniale as an orthodox thriller. As we will explore later on, it is precisely through these moments of blurred agency that Ferrante at once invokes the mystery genre (and, among others, the feuilleton) and turns it on its head. But in order to appreciate this, we must not resolve mysteries that the text simply refuses to clarify.
have on the structure of the novel. In other words, Ferrante’s Naples is not a place where magical things happen. Enrica Maria Ferrara provides an interesting alternative to the magical realist explanation. In “Performative Realism and Post-Humanism in The Days of Abandonment,” she approaches the explosion of the pot as the “symbol and the signifier of a reality in which objects interact with one another and produce effects on human and non-human entities irrespective of whether or not cognitive subjects are able to make sense of them” (141-42). While recognizing the magical-realist overtones of some passages in the novel, Ferrara presents an argument that hinges not on the fantastic, but on a post-human vision of a world in which “matter is alive and provided with its own finality” (142). In this way, the cognitive subject must go beyond Carthesian dualism to change their vision of the world. Ferrara’s argument is compelling, yet my reservations of agential realism aside, I think it overlooks two things: on the one hand, the fact that the explosion must remain an inexplicable event, and, on the other, that Elena turns the copper pot (or reveals it to be) a leitmotif. Elena not only recognizes the ways in which Lila has turned the pot into a symbol, but she does this as well.

Ultimately, Ferrara’s argument is an ontological one, while mine operates primarily on the narrative plane and hinges on the idea that the explosion is not only left unexplained but has to remain inexplicable. Hence semantic closure is continually denied to us by way of this and the many other instances of blurred agency, a point to which the following chapters will return. It is telling that the only sound Elena hears as the Solara brothers are being murdered, “pah, pah, pah, pah,” is the exact same sound that she hears on December 31st, 1958, as the Solara brothers fire bullets at the party gathered at Stefano’s house. In other words, the sounds that announce the Solara’s ascent in the rione after Don Achille’s death are the same sounds that mark their exit—the bullets, as it were, ricocheting in a metaphoric movement that indexes the novel’s metabolic
failure, which, blocking the plot’s progress, has caused it to return to its origins. And indeed, it is precisely on that New Year’s Eve that Lila has her first experience of smarginatura. The affective smarginatura of that first episode, is, after Tina’s disappearance and so many decades later, transformed into a structural smarginatura, linked by that pah to those “effects without cause” that signal the disruption of plot. 47

This disruption of plot is further announced by the transformation I just mentioned from plot into diceria. Like legend and other forms of speech, diceria differs from plot in that it privileges the general over the specific. Diceria, we can say, is not affected by individual desires and intention in the way that plot is, if anything because it, by definition, belongs to a community. In the cyclicity of the rione, after Elena and Lila and all others are long gone, the storia of Tina will prevail, at the cost of its particulars of course, divested from anything that relates it to plot. Diceria, too, I would argue, shares with legend what Susan Winnett calls a “dispassionate economy” (515). Plot might turn to diceria and to legend because it is not viable anymore, because it will not flow, hence returning us to the question of the metabolic workings of a text.

And if plot will not flow, if it cannot be processed, a narrative inflammation can be said to occur. In this particularity we part from Brooks, who speaks thus of tumescence: “narrative desire, the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention” (103). Contrary to Brooks, I suggest that

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47 I am neither the first nor alone in noting the structural implications of smarginatura. de Rogatis contends that the term, apart from describing Lila’s disintegrative experience, is also “una disaggregazione che scompone – ancor prima dei contenuti – la struttura e la compattezza della trama. Smarginare la narrazione significa contaminare il flusso coinvolgente del plot con una contro-forza che al contrario disarticola la progressione lineare della storia” (Parole 334) / “a disintegration that undoes—even before the content—the structure and compactness of the plot. To dissolve the margins (smarginare) of the narration means to contaminate the captivating flow of the plot with a counterforce that, on the contrary, disrupts the linear progression of the story” (my translation).
tumescence, rather than signaling the beginning of narrative, can instead be symptomatic of a metabolic disorder. This scenario permits us to do away with the tired binaries of the plot-cum-male-sexuality model: exposition and rising action/excitement, climax/orgasm, falling action/refractory period, and denouement/resolution\(^{48}\) (the same applies to the more economical, tripartite division of conflict/climax/resolution, which can also find correlatives in the male sexual response cycle). Doing away with this model prevents us from reading all the plots in the last Storia as a protracted denouement, namely, as Ferrante’s attempt to follow through with the lives of her dozens of characters. It would force us, too, to rethink the Quartet’s relation to what I argue is its most charged event, the disappearance of Tina.\(^{49}\)

The question nevertheless remains why this event is deliberately kept from us. The sale of the cherry orchard has happened off stage. Why? It is worth our time to ask this question, and to wonder whether, in denying us a front-row seat to one of the most important events in the novel, Elena is not denying us a form of textual pleasure. This is a particularly fruitful site of critique, one that is made even more relevant in that last chapter of the last Storia, where Elena alludes to “what in the fiction of the story serves in all innocence to reach the heart of the reader” and confesses that “to intensify the emotional effects I had used the fact that one of the dolls and the lost child had the same name.” Taking aside Elena’s disingenuous claim that she “innocently” wanted to get to her readers’ hearts, what do we make of her claim to please, or move, her readers, both in linking Tina’s disappearance to Lila’s wish to give Imma importance in Nino’s eyes and, moreover, in linking the name of her lost doll to the lost child? What kind of

\(^{48}\) This is Gustav Freytag’s approach to dramatic structure, meant, clearly, as an analysis of Shakespearean and ancient Greek plays. Still, I believe that it is still representative of the ways in which we approach more “traditional” plots.

\(^{49}\) It would also give a new meaning to our earlier discussion of the disconcerting possibility that the “gioco perfido” that inaugurates the friendship bears the stamp of the rotten.
textual pleasure is Elena alluding to? How do these gratuitous literary connections please readers? Is Elena displacing the pleasure she feels in punishing Lila for throwing her dolls when they were nine? Is this *plaisir* the sadistic counterpart of Barthes’s *passion du sens*, which the novel seems to be critiquing?

We must postpone the question and focus on the effects that the absent climax of the story has in the novel’s inner workings, as well as its relation to tumescence. We said before that tumescence or bloating can be symptomatic of a metabolic disorder, which can occur because of an accident, and thus be acute, or it can be gradual. It can be, for our purposes, present on the level of structure, but it can also be present in the narrative, thematized. So, for instance, I see the swelling of plots in the last Storia as a form of structural acute bloating. The conflation of plots mentioned above, none of which are properly metabolized, cause a form of hypothyroidism of the plot and give a sense of textual constipation.50 Tina’s disappearance looms over the rest of the Quartet and retains its status as the most unprocessed of griefs, the unmentionable obstruction hindering all other plots from developing. The accumulation of plots becomes the text’s constant search for a viable path on which to proceed. An effort, of course, doomed to fail so long as Tina’s plot remains unprocessed.

As I mentioned before, the opposite process is present in *I giorni dell’abbandono*, a novel with an acute hyperthyroidic pace51 which suffers from a sort of narrative runs. *I giorni* revolves around a single plot (Olga’s abandonment) and the incessant attempt to process it and do away

50 Hypothyroidism is a “a condition in which the level of thyroxine in the blood is abnormally low resulting in a decreased metabolic rate and which when severe causes cretinism (if the condition was congenital) and myxœdema (if acquired)” (“hypo’thyrodism”). It can thus cause constipation.

51 Hyperthyroidism is defined as “a condition in which the thyroid gland produces more hormone than normal, resulting in an increased rate of metabolism, often with wasting of muscle and loss of weight together with restlessness and emotional instability.” (“hyper’thyroidism”). Diarrhea can be one of its symptoms.
with it correctly. Thematically, these narrative runs are materialized in Olga’s public defecation; structurally, they are most evident in the sense of urgency and immediacy of the novel. There is no narrative bloating to speak of here, a fact that perhaps accounts for how short the novel is and that hints at a correlation in hypothyroidic texts between constipation and the inability to “land” on a given plot,\(^{52}\) and, conversely, a correlation in hyperthyroidic texts between narrative runs and an obsessive, almost threatening attention to detail—and even, in Genettian terms, a wide disparity between a short narrative time and a long discourse time (most of I giorni takes place on one day, whereas we have noted the opposite tendency in the Quartet’s last Storia).

A different metabolic disorder that I identify in the Quartet, one that precedes (but in more ways than one anticipates) Tina’s disappearance, is a form of thematized gradual bloating exhibited in Alfonso’s subplot: “A un certo punto si lamentò che aveva l’intestino intasato, che sentiva un male cane a quello che – rivolgendosi alle bambine – chiamò culetto” (SBP 261) / “At a certain point he complained that he had a blocked intestine, that he had a terrible pain in what—addressing the girls—he called his ass” (SLC 277).\(^{53}\) Alfonso’s character is the locus of a conglomeration (a tangle) of competing discourses all related with his role both in the rione and in the novel. My reasoning here is inspired by Fraiman, who writes, in Unbecoming Women:

> Instead of reconceiving the genre in terms of the different road taken by the female individual, I suggest we locate its multiple narratives within a larger, cacophonous discourse about female formation…. “What are the several developmental narratives at

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\(^{52}\) A consequence of hypothyroidism might be a deficiency in catabolism. Textually, then, the hypothyroidic aspect of the Storia dell cattivo sangue accounts for the fact that despite all of the subplots that are present in the text, none of them truly succeeds in releasing the energy necessary for plot to restart. In other words, though so many important things happen, they give rise to no sense of tension. And because tension and the prospect of its resolution (both as the proairetic and the hermeneutic in Barthes’s terms) are crucial to the impulse or forward-looking aspects of a text, the Storia feels stagnant.

\(^{53}\) Needless to say, this literary diagnosis should not be taken as an attempt at medical etiology.
work in this novel and what can they tell us about competing ideologies of the feminine?" 

(12)

Doubtless, this question is applicable to all female characters in the Quartet, yet I would argue that Alfonso’s precarious sense of identity (as perceived by the characters and by the narration itself) makes him more fluid and prone to manipulation.

Alfonso’s constipation comes at a point when his relationship with Michele has been abruptly severed. His trajectory spans from being Stefano’s inconspicuous, less masculine, younger brother, to Elena’s faithful companion and desk mate; to jaunty manager of the shoe store in Piazza dei Martiri and later on Marissa’s reluctant husband; on to Lila’s “creation” and Michele’s lover; and, finally, victim of hate crime. Alfonso is, without a doubt, one of the Quartet’s most interesting and developed characters. For what we might call narratological reasons, however, he remains in the background for most of the novel (as do, admittedly, most characters) because Elena’s narrating voice and conscience tend to be all-encompassing. We must return to this point, as it is one of the most important aspects of the novel, one that has been the source of much criticism from scholars and of frustration from readers at large.54 As for Alfonso, Elena confesses: “della sua diversità non ero mai stata consapevole” (SBP 174) / “I had never been aware that he was different” (SLC 188). In fact, when he reveals to her that he likes men and mentions that Lila has known for some time, Elena’s first reaction is to feel left out, followed by regret that it had not occurred to her before. This regret, undoubtedly, is not a form of remorse at failing to be a more attentive friend, but rather regret that she is perhaps not as

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54 Could we speak of Elena in terms of what Keats deemed “the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone” as opposed to the “camelion Poet … [who] has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body” (152)? The answer, of course, is not definitive, and I do think that the Quartet itself is, in many ways, a 1700-page exercise in trying to bridge the gap between two subjectivities.
observant of, and definitely not as involved in, the lives of the people in the rione, as well as the concurring realization that Lila is. Physically, her reaction is to look at his shoes: “Di tanto in tanto gli fissai le scarpe lucidissime, mi chiesi se le comprava altrove o erano scarpe Solara che acquistava con uno sconto.” What can we make of this seemingly arbitrary observation? It is, one could argue, Elena’s way of avoiding the confession, and, in doing so, of refusing to acknowledge her poor observational skills. Yet the focus on the shoes bears another significance that points us in a new direction.

I borrow the idea of converging plots in the Quartet from Brooks and his discussion of Great Expectations. He identifies four lines of plots and proceeds to pair them up and divide them in terms of how repressed they are. As a sort of corrective to Brooks’s analysis, I see these lines as representations of what Fraiman calls “discourses of development at war in a given text” (140). Fraiman’s study is central to my understanding of the Quartet, especially her assertion that when ideology of Bildung is driven up against ideologies of femininity urging self-effacement one result may be precisely the splintering and counterpointing of narratives I have identified in Burney, Austen, and Bronte, and that appear with particular explicitness in The Mill on the Floss. (140)

While the temporal and spatial context of this dissertation is wildly different from that of Fraiman’s study, there are still strong parallels in the kind of discursive contexts surrounding, among other things, the position these women occupy in their society. That Elena and Lila and all the other female characters in the novel are in one way or another subjected to ideologies of

55 This sentence, as well as the one preceding it and the one succeeding it, are entirely absent in previous reprints of the novel, as well as in the English translation. The passage quoted is taken from the Edizione completa published in October 2017 (13770). I do not know the reasons for the addition.
female self-effacement seems to me undeniable.\textsuperscript{56} That they are infinitely more conscious of them than many of Fraiman’s heroines is also undeniable. I am particularly interested in what Fraiman calls “the splintering and counterpointing of narratives” and in the ways in which this splintering can allow us a fuller understanding of Ferrante’s continuous use of images and terms revolving around dissociation, dissolution, and destructuration, most importantly \textit{frantumaglia}, \textit{smarginatura}, \textit{squadernamento}, and \textit{scombussolamento}.

But to return to the shoes. The Cerullo shoes stand at the center of one of the Quartet’s most prominent plot lines: the fairy tale plot. This is a plot that the novel invokes and revokes from its very beginning, subjecting it to material transformations and reworkings: \textit{La fata blu} is the first materialization of this plotline; later, it will give way to the shoes that Lila designs and creates with Rino. These are at once Lila’s response to being denied the possibility of an education and her only way of accessing the world outside the \textit{rione}, both imaginatively (the fairy tale in its pure state) and socially (the fairy tale turned “real”). That Stefano finally buys them establishes him as a princely figure.\textsuperscript{57} From the beginning, however, the novel makes evident the traditional fairy plot’s inadequacy to the reality of the \textit{rione}. Lila, always the spirit of contradiction, offers the strongest resistance to the straitjacketing force of discourse and convention: “continuando a stupirci, si inginocchiò davanti a Stefano e servendosi del calzascarpe gli aiutò il piede a scivolare nella calzatura nuova” (AG 236-37) / “Lila, surprising us again, knelt in front of Stefano and using the shoehorn helped him slip his foot into the new

\textsuperscript{56} While this chapter’s focus is more narrowly on plot, we must not forget that discourses of female formation are also embodied. As Wehling-Giorgi reminds us: “The violated maternal/female body emerges as a ‘site of contestation’ in Ferrante’s oeuvre, which metonymically reproduces the underlying conflicts concerning the development of the female subject throughout her texts” (13). Although ubiquitous, the centrality of the body is most prominently advanced in the episode of Lila’s wedding photograph.

\textsuperscript{57} Fraiman details the presence of male figures in \textit{Evelina} who are introduced as rescuers but eventually turn into assailants. This trajectory is particularly evident in Stefano.
shoe” (*MBF* 241). The novel places a strain on the fairytale not only as Lila takes the place structurally allotted to the prince in *Cinderella*, but also through a statement that she will make to Elena later in the novel: “guarda: i sogni della testa sono finiti sotto i piedi” (*AG* 310) / “But yes, look: the mind’s dreams have ended up under the feet” (*MBF* 314).

More important, an explicitly inverted form of the fairy tale subtends this line—not the witch tale, as Brooks identifies in *Great Expectations*, but the ogre tale, as personified by Don Achille, “l’orco delle favole.”58 Don Achille will be one of the Quartet’s most overwhelming presences, a curious fact if we consider that his death comes early on and that he is directly present in one single scene. Curious, that is, if we expect corruption to operate overtly. In truth, Don Achilles’s ubiquity (made possible precisely by his physical absence) neatly conforms to the novel’s commentary on the clandestine workings of corruption, which in turn explains the transformation of the fairy tale plot of courtship (Stefano as suitor) into the ogre tale plot (Stefano turning into his father). On the first night of her honeymoon, Lila realizes that Don Achille has always been hiding inside Stefano: “Non è mai stato Stefano, le parve all’improvviso di scoprire, è stato sempre il figlio grande di don Achille” (*SNC* 41) / “He was never Stefano, she seemed to discover suddenly, he was always the oldest son of Don Achille” (*SNN* 41).59 This unavoidable resurfacing of the ogre tale plot constitutes a part of the text’s insistence on the failed promise of younger generations and the pervasiveness of corruption (ethical, intellectual, emotional, but also, as our metabolic model suggests, digestive), which entangles everything in

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58 Our reserve to adopt psychoanalytic terms extends to the present discussion. I hesitate to label this second plot as a repressed plot, the way Brooks does, yet I do want to emphasize its subterranean qualities and the ways in which it covertly follows Elena and Lila throughout the novel.

59 Even more disconcertingly, Don Achille will reappear in Lila’s son: “più che Stefano ricorda fisicamente suo nonno, don Achille” (*SBP* 370) / “more than Stefano he physically recalled his grandfather, Don Achille” (*SLC* 389).
its way, as objectified in *Little Women*, which Elena and Lila purchase with the money Don Achille gives them.60

Even before Stefano rapes Lila, the gifting of the shoes to Marcello Solara stands as the first clear indication of a narrative transformation. This symbolic transaction is ultimately founded on discourses of masculinity that continue to transpire throughout Stefano’s life in his submissive relationship with the Solaras; it forces onto Lila the recognition that her dream—her plot—has been trafficked and that she will continue to be exchangeable so long as she stays with Stefano. It is indicative, too, of the transformation that the respective plots will undergo, from the fairy tale/ogre plots of childhood and adolescence into the plots of social ascent/corruption of youth. That the production of the shoes is later entirely taken over by the Solaras is not simply an act of literary retribution, a punishment to Rino and Stefano for giving Marcello Lila’s shoes, but also a commentary on the horribly capitalistic turn the plot has taken,61 just as the fact that the

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60 Always ahead of us, Elena realizes the concealed influence that Don Achille has had in her life when she recalls the money she and Lila took from him in exchange for their dolls: “con quei soldi non avevamo comprato bambole – come avremmo potuto sostituire Tina e Nu? – ma *Picolle donne*, il romanzo che aveva indotto Lila a scrivere *La fata blu* e me a diventare ciò che ero oggi, l’autrice di molti libri e soprattutto di un racconto di notevole successo che si intitolava *Un’amicizia*” (SBP 451) / “we hadn’t bought dolls with that money—how could we have replaced Tina and Nu?—instead we bought *Little Women*, the novel that had led Lila to write *The Blue Fairy* and me to become what I was today, the author of many books and, most important, of a remarkably successful story entitled *A Friendship*” (SLC 473).

61 The rise of the Solara family, as well as of Stefano, is a direct consequence of the Italian economic miracle occurring in the 1950s and 1960s. For a more detailed account of the boom, see Russo Bullaro’s “The Era of the ‘Economic Miracle’ and the Force of Context in Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend.*” As Elena writes, “In tutto il rione fiorivano iniziative... Tutto insomma tremolava, si inarcava come per cambiare i connotati, non farsi riconoscere negli odi accumulati, nelle tensioni, nelle brutture, e mostrare invece una faccia nuova” (AG 105) / “Initatives flourished in the whole neighborhood.... In other words everything was quivering, arching upward as if to change its characteristics, not to be known by the accumulated hatreds, tensions, ugliness but, rather, to show a new face” (MBF 108-09). The shoes, thus, are at once caught up in the promise of economic prosperity, while their absorption into the Solara network underscores the corrupt side of this prosperity and the impossibility of remaining uninvolved in corrupt practices.
Cerullo label is taken over by the Solara label is symptomatic of the dog-eat-dog world of the rione.

Alfonso is in more ways than one caught in the middle of this world and at the center of these warring discourses. On the one hand, there is the eternal question: “Anche Alfonso nascondeva in petto don Achille, suo padre, malgrado l’aria delicata?” (SNC 47) / “Did Alfonso also conceal Don Achille, his father, in his breast, despite his delicate appearance?” (SNN 48). At the opening of the shoe store in Piazza dei Martiri, Elena is sure that he “nascondeva dentro di sé un’altra persona” (SNC 127) / “Ah yes, he concealed inside himself another person” (SNN 127), yet in this case it is the insinuation of a person who is much more at home in the socioeconomic world represented by Piazza dei Martiri. Perhaps because Alfonso’s alterity is of a different kind than Elena’s, a kind that is not immediately visible and for which the rione allows him even fewer means of expression than it does Elena and Lila, his character comes off as nebulous. I use this word consciously, in a nod to Tony Tanner’s description of Emma Bovary:

Emma is caught and lost, caressed and violated, created and destroyed in and by the language into which she is born—a signal victim of the privileged discourses the time…. In answer to the question—who or what is Emma Bovary?—we can ultimately only say “le vague elle,” a presence dissipated by overdescription, a vagueness beyond all words. Much of the fog in her head may be traced to this; her situation and the language dominated by a confusion of male ascriptions and descriptions and prescriptions. (312) Alfonso’s case, nevertheless, is one of underdescription. We find him constantly in a desperate search for a viable plot, a search that is doomed to be short-circuited by the imposition of other plots—be it in the form of Michele forcing him to marry Marisa, or even in the form of Lila’s
well-meaning impulse to remodel him—and concluding, as we have noted, in a literal and structural constipation.

It is precisely this vagueness that allows Lila to take on the role of creator vis-à-vis Alfonso and model him after her own image (partly at the service, we must not forget, of exacting revenge on Michele Solara):

Tu prendi Alfonso, mi ha messo ansia fin da quando era ragazzino, ho sentito che il filo di cotone che lo teneva insieme stava per rompersi. E Michele? Michele si credeva chissà chi, e invece è bastato trovare la linea di contorno e tirare, ah, ah ah, l’ho spezzato, ho spezzato il suo cotone e l’ho ingarbugliato con quello di Alfonso, materia di maschio dentro materia di maschio, la tela che tessi di giorno si disfa di notte, la testa trova il modo. (SBP 163-64)

Take Alfonso, he’s always made me nervous, ever since he was a boy, I’ve felt that the cotton thread that held him together was about to break. And Michele? Michele thought he was who knows what, and yet all I had to do was find his boundary line and pull, oh, oh, I broke it, I broke his cotton thread and tangled it with Alfonso’s, male material inside male material, the fabric that I weave by day is unraveled by night, the head finds a way. (177-78)

That Lila speaks of the “thread” that kept Alfonso together only reinforces our proposition that the fragility and vagueness of Alfonso is tied to his lack of a viable plot. Surprisingly, Lila

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62 See the following passage from L’amore molesto: “La storia poteva essere più debole o più avvincente di quella che mi ero raccontata. Bastava tirare via un filo e seguirlo nella sua linearità semplificatoria” (171) / “The story might be more fragile or more interesting than the one I had told myself. It was enough to pull out a single thread and follow it in its simplifying linearity” (134).

63 The connection between thread and plot is nicely captured in the Italian trama, which connotes both weave and plot. Although the word text finds its root in the act of weaving as well, it does not suggest the act of plotting the way trama does. An ancient and perhaps overused metaphor, yet one that Ferrante has cleverly reworked in most of her novels to highlight the fabricated nature of stories.
invokes—and compares herself—to Penelope, the weaver *par excellence*. Coupled with the thread/plot metaphor is the relationship between Lila and Alfonso as creator/creature, reinforced through the passages that describe Elena’s second published book, in which she discusses the story of the creation of man and woman. Elena externalizes this connection and recognizes that in Lila and Alfonso, the story of divine creation is inversed: “Era un rapporto singolare, pareva fondato su un flusso segreto che, muovendo da lei, lo rimodellava” (*SBP* 149) / “It was a singular relationship, based on a secret flow that, moving from her, remodeled him” (*SLC* 163). She sees Isha’h’s lack of ontological and linguistic autonomy from Ish in Alfonso, who, deprived of any sense of alterity, also lacks consistency. I mean this in both senses of the word, for in lacking consistency as firmness, Alfonso is subject to what Tanner calls “dissolving liquefactions.” On the other hand, by lacking consistency as agreement, Alfonso is missing the consistency that keeps a plot together—the red thread, as it were. That he becomes entangled with Lila and Michele, that he relies on them for an outline, goes to show how beset he is by shapelessness. Insofar as he is shapeless, he is lacking a form, and thus a literary form, a plot.

I see further sign of Alfonso’s “vagueness” in what can only be interpreted as a conscious decision on Ferrante’s part not to mention the Neapolitan figure that his character unequivocally brings to mind: the *femminiello*, whom de Rogatis describes thus:

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64 Lila’s involvement in this story of creation has led me to suspect a parallel with the Biblical figure of Lilith, Adam’s first wife, who, unlike Eve, was created from the same dirt as Adam. There is certainly a close phonetic resemblance; furthermore, the constant association of Lila to demonic figures suggests this connection. This would provide us with an alternative to the interpretation of Lila in terms of the Mephistophelian demonic (a very useful interpretation, certainly), or perhaps even related to it, if we consider that the figure of Lilith makes an appearance in *Faust*.

65 Tanner’s discussion pertains novels of adultery in particular: “the problematical relationship (or opposition) between the dissolving liquefactions of passion and the binding structurations of marriage is at the very heart, or âme, of the great bourgeois novels of adultery” (172). Needless to say, the context varies, yet Tanner’s elaboration on the resulting tension between fiery passions and social structuration is extremely pertinent to all characters in the Quartet, but more specifically to Alfonso and the women.
Figura esuberante della diversità, insieme maschile e femminile (come dice già il nome), storicamente riconosciuta e integrata (a differenza dell’omosessuale) nei quartieri popolari napoletani attraverso una serie di riti specifici (tra questi, la figliata: una messa in scena del parto), al femminiello viene attribuito uno statuto magico, associato alla buona sorte, perché rappresenta una unione metafisica dei due sessi. (“Metamorfosi” 136)

Exuberant figures of diversity, both masculine and feminine (as the name suggests), historically recognized and integrated (unlike the homosexual) in popular Neapolitan neighborhoods through a series of specific rites (among these, the figliata: a staging of childbirth), femminielli are attributed magical qualities, associated with good luck, because they represent a metaphysical union of both sexes. (my translation)

Seeing Alfonso wearing a dress, Elena remarks: “era anche più bello, più bella di lei, un maschio-femmina di quelli che avevo raccontato nel mio libro, pronto, pronta, a incamminarsi per la strada che porta alla Madonna nera di Montevergine” (SBP 151) / “he was even handsomer, more beautiful than she, a male-female of the type I had talked about in my book, ready, male and female, to set off on the road leading to the black Madonna of Montevergine” (SLC 164). The reference to Montevergine is a clear allusion to the femminielli’s role in the Candelora al Santuario di Montevergine. Why, then, would Elena not mention this? Is it a form of shunning excessive depictions of local color? A refusal to let “reality” break into the story?

Would the story’s brand of realism be compromised by such an intrusion? It appears to me that de Rogatis makes the very interesting point that, by withholding the sociological term, Ferrante, as it were, translates Alfonso’s character for a wider audience: “Ferrante è stata ben attenta a non attribuire al personaggio di Alfonso quella sfumatura folcloristica che una percezione superficiale del termine napoletano rischiava di evocare in un pubblico più ampio. Il valore simbolico della sua trasformazione rimane così intatto, traducibile (insieme al dialetto napoletano) in un contesto nazionale e internazionale” (Parole 2282) / “Ferrante was careful not to attribute to Alfonso’s character that folkloristic shade that a superficial perception of the Neapolitan term risked evoking in a larger audience. The symbolic value of the transformation thus remains intact, translatable (along with Neapolitan dialect) in a national and
all these are valid considerations, but I think, too, that the refusal to name the *femminniello* is further confirmation of Alfonso’s shapelessness—added confusion to the descriptions prescriptions and ascriptions attributed (or not attributed) to him. Naming him would somehow consolidate a sense of identity, whereas Alfonso—like Lila—is always tending toward what Tanner calls the *thalassic*. In fact, his dead body is found, like Amalia’s in *Troubling Love*, on the beach. In the end, Lila’s feminine influence vanishes to make way to Don Achille’s more robust masculinity. But as it has already been shown how little Alfonso can adjust to this plot, the conglomeration of warring discourses besetting him cannot but end in a breakdown of metabolic functions and, therefore, in the literal constipation he suffers from.

If Alfonso dies victim to warring discourses and an accumulation of inadequate plots, why not Lila, as well? Certainly, both Lila and Elena are subject to contradicting plots and discourses. Is it that the kind of nebulosity caused by the fact that he does not possess the language to understand his gender identity will continuously prevent Alfonso from finding a suitable plot, whereas, in the case of Lila, the effacement imposed by the warring discourses that surround her can be recuperated as willful self-effacement? Or can we, rather gratuitously, summon Genette’s *arbitraire* and attribute Alfonso’s death simply to the fact that he is not the protagonist of the novel? We can arrive at no certain conclusion, of course, and we must now move on to other considerations.

This chapter, besides exploring the ways in which Elena lays bare the device of her text, has also explored the metabolic disorder that her text undergoes. It is my argument that this international context” (my translation). This “translatability,” de Rogatis contends, forms part of a larger aesthetic project that makes Ferrante one of our time’s “glocal” novelists.

67 “This kind of regression, associated with water, I shall refer to as thalassic, following Sandor Ferenczi’s use of the word in *Thalassa*” (72).

68 Or, as we shall discuss, *italicized*, in Nancy K. Miller’s terms.
metabolic disorder is the result of a twofold process: first, in purposely connecting the loss of the dolls to the disappearance of Tina, Elena ensured that the energy released by the former event was formalized throughout the text and finally bound and discharged completely by the latter (and that therefore whatever ensued would be an appendix to that particular story); second, insofar as Tina’s disappearance in the narrative is the result of a punitive impulse, it comes at the cost of having to lay bare the device of the text, and in the process, of doing away with all sense of causality. Having been freed form the binds of causality, the last storia drifts, unable to retrieve the energies necessary to revive the plot, its metabolism blocked. And even if the artifice is only laid bare at the very end of Elena’s text, the continuous resurfacing of the dolls in connection with the daughters, especially in the fourth volume, makes it evident to readers that the hand of the author has purposely ordered events in a particular way in order to obtain particular effects. This, in fact, has been part of the criticism aimed at the novel, namely, that it is too “obvious,” that events are too symbolically, almost too vulgarly, representative of certain affects, such as the connection between the earthquake and Lila’s smarginatura. Take, for instance, Elisa Gambaro’s assertion that

69 And thus that the output of the catabolic beginning is received as input by the anabolic ending. In this sense, the feedback between these two processes provides the text with an organic quality that is later offset by the hypothyroidic condition of the last storia. If hypothyroidism results in a deficiency in catabolism, then, we could say that the text, in thermodynamic terms, is at no risk of entropy, but rather the opposite. Consequently, if entropy as catabolism provides with raw material, then the deficiency in entropy of the last storia is also a deficiency in the energy necessary to set a plot in motion.

70 In the next chapter, we will touch upon the extent to which a story can be sustained without taking recourse in more orthodox conceptions of plot and causality, even if consciously resisting them.

71 In this sense, can Lila trust Elena? Is the practice of affidamento (entrustment) propounded by Luisa Muraro and crucial to the Libreria delle donne di Milano in the 1980s put to the test by the novel’s retributive energies. As Elwell points out, affidamento “places emphasis not on a given similarity between women but rather on the specificity of each woman and on differences among women” (243). The marked difference between the two friends, as well as their reliance on each other, are both nods to the feminist concept; yet one cannot ignore Elena’s unreliability.
Ferrante insists, to the point of the most shameless implausibility (in-verisimilitude) and often on the border of bad melodramatic taste, on the asymmetrical symmetry governing the opaque duplicity between the two protagonists: the story is filled with a shocking amount of *mise en abymes*, oppositions, similarities, and forced coincidences. (my translation)

There is an undeniable sense of explicitness to *L’amica geniale*; yet far from seeing it as the mark of lowbrow literature (which, let it be said, reeks of classist attitudes to us), we take it instead to be a manifestation of what Genette calls “ce [que la fiction] a de concerté, comme dit Valincour, c’est-à-dire d’artificiel.” I hope, therefore, that these pages have given an idea of, on the one hand, the kind of artistic authority that Elena wields over her text, and, on the other, the ways in which this manipulation perversely suggests that the text’s metabolic failures at the end are the result of the *cattivo sangue* left over from a story of revenge—a story inaugurated by an act committed under the auspices of treachery and corruption.

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Porciani laments about passages in the novel in which everything seems “sin troppo geometrico e ragionato” (174) / “much too geometrical and planned” (my translation).
CHAPTER 2. UN’AFFACCIARSI

“Perciò i racconti tanto più sono efficaci, quanto più sono parapetti da cui si può guardare tutto quello che è rimasto fuori.”

A story inaugurated by an act committed under the auspices of treachery and corruption—but surely, Elena and Lila’s friendship is more than treachery and corruption? Surely, treachery and corruption are not the starting and end points of a friendship we have spent 1700 pages following and caring about? Still, there, in the Latinate root of inaugurate, lies an augur, a further reminder that the end is foretold by and encapsulated in the beginning, or, as Brooks would have it, that whatever the beginning, we are always bound to read it through the lens of the knowledge we gain at the end. Or, to complicate things even further, that the beginning, as Genette would have it, is such only that it might lead us to a particular end. That being said, if we adopt de Lauretis’s provoking suggestion that “sadism is the causal agent, the deep structure, the generative force of narrative” (Alice 103) and concede that behind Elena’s narration there might be a desire to punish, we cannot, on the other hand, turn a blind eye to aspects of her friendship with Lila that belie an opposite impulse. If the inauguration of Elena’s text augurs treason through the incident of the dolls and the association with Don Achille, it also augurs fidelity in the moment with which that first chapter ends, namely, the moment when Lila, stopping to wait for Elena on the stairs, extends her hand in a gesture of solidarity. Similarly, the disingenuous apology that Elena provides for the end of her friendship with Lila is countered, paragraphs later, by what seems like a much franker avowal: “Io che ho scritto mesi e mesi e mesi per darle una forma che non si smargini, e batterla, e calmarla, e così a mia volta calmarmi” (SBP 444) / “I who have written for months and months and months to give her a form whose boundaries won’t dissolve, and defeat her, and calm her, and so in turn calm myself” (SLC 466).
Many pivotal issues raised in *L’amica geniale* are condensed in this statement, in which Elena recognizes that the impulse to preserve, ostensibly generous, cohabits with the impulse to defeat, ostensibly not generous. It is this tension that drives the narrative forward and, in many ways, counterbalances the sense of linearity, both in relation to causality and coherence. “Tra noi due,” as Elena writes, “tutto era più aggrovigliato.”

It is with the figure of the *groviglio/garbuglio*, or tangle, that I want to begin this chapter. We previously discussed how the word, in the tradition of Gadda, speaks of a need to reform conceptualizations of causality and drive them away from the figure of the linear and into a figure of convergence, the tangle. We find a connection to emplotment in the last of the terms that Gadda uses for this figure: “Diceva anche nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio, o gnommero, che alla romana vuol dire gomitolo” (7) / “He also used words like knot or tangle, or muddle, or gnommero, which in Roman dialect means skein” (5). *Gomitolo*, a ball of thread, drives us back to one of the central metaphors for the act of plotting, allowing us to extend Gadda’s critique from the purely philosophical to the literary. The previous chapter has hopefully provided some stimulating observations on how Elena’s text, in the course of the story but especially at the end, at once adopts a sense of linear causality but also subverts it through the recognition of the arbitrary connections made in *Un’amicizia*.

To what extent, however, can plot exist without this illusory sense of linear causality? The twentieth century, in its revolt against the highly plotted novels of the nineteenth century, exposed the arbitrariness of plot’s alleged fidelity to time and causality.73 Yet as Brooks well

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73 That this revolt is accompanied by a revisitation of and newfound admiration for the eighteenth-century novelistic tradition characterized by its rejection of linear plot, a tradition best represented by Sterne, is undeniable. I am not sure, however, that the Modernist suspicion of plot is completely analogous to Sterne’s parodization of Aristotelian notions of plot, not to mention the fact that Sterne never referred to *Tristram Shandy* as a novel.
points outs, these novels, though “complicating and even subversive of the tradition, maintain a vital relation to it” (xii). However averse to plot, can a novel ever be truly divorced from it? If by the mere act of sitting down to write and describe a set of events we are ordering them, to what extent can we truly distance ourselves from the sort of causal violence that plotting entails? Many critics who disdainfully look down on plot cannot but recognize its necessity. Ortega y Gasset, on the one hand, argued that action, being no more than a mechanical element “esa estéticamente peso muerto, y, por tanto, debe reducirse al mínimo” (“Ideas” 894) / “[i]s aesthetically dead weight, [and] ought to be reduced to a minimum” (“Notes” 305); on the other hand, he considered it “indispensable,” as explained in his observations on Proust. “En Proust,” he writes,

la morosidad, la lentitud llega a su extremo y casi se convierte en una serie de planos estáticos, sin movimiento alguno, sin progreso ni tensión. Su lectura nos convence de que la medida de la lentitud conveniente se ha traspasado. La trama queda casi anulada y se borra el postrer resto de interés dramático. La novela queda así reducida a pura descripción inmóvil, y exagerado con exclusivismo el carácter difuso, atmosférico, sin acción concreta, que es, en efecto, esencial al género. Notamos que le falta el esqueleto, el sostén rígido y tenso, que son los alambres en el paraguas. Deshuesado el cuerpo novelesco se convierte en nube informe, en plasma sin figura, en pulpa sin dintorno. (“Ideas” 893)

so slowly does the action move that it seems more like a sequence of ecstatic stillnesses without progress or tension. Reading this “remembrance of things past” we feel convinced that the permissible measure of slowness is overstepped. Plot there is almost none; and not a whit of dramatic interest. Thus the novel is reduced to pure motionless
description, and the diffuse, atmospheric character, which is in fact essential to the genre, appears here with exaggerated purity. We feel the lack of a firm and rigid support, of something like the ribs in an umbrella. Deprived of its bones, the body of the novel is converted into a cloudy, shapeless mass. (‘Notes’ 304)

I am drawn to this architectural, semi-mechanical approach. Such a formulation of the workings of plot can be said to resemble the thermodynamic model in that it gives plot the motor qualities necessary to sustain a narrative. My own reservations about the idiosyncrasies attached to it notwithstanding, Ortega y Gasset’s idea of a novel turned into a cloudy, shapeless mass deeply informs my understanding of the threat of the shapeless continuously lurking behind the plot of L’amica geniale. Regardless of the literary dignity that one might attribute to plot as opposed to other aspects of a novel, few would deny that some sort of ordering needs to occur for a story to be told. I nonetheless part from Ortega y Gasset, and many of Ferrante’s detractors, in that rather than simply dismissing a novel because it lacks the support of plot,74 I have chosen to direct my critical attention to those forces that threaten to deform and misshape, certain that they can provide valuable insight into the inherent value of the plotting activity and our constant need to understand and process the world through stories. In short, what I am after is a thematics of emplotment.

Ortega y Gasset’s conception of plot as “a merely mechanical element and aesthetically dead weight” is a clear prioritization of what he calls substance over function, which explains his numerous figures of plot as support, “the ribs in an umbrella,” the bones of a body, the strings that unite the beads in a necklace. In this last particular image, he is not alone; a quarter of a

74 Ortega y Gasset goes as far as calling À la recherche a “novela paralítica” (‘Ideas’ 897) / “paralytic novel” (‘Notes’ 307).
century before him, Henry James wrote similarly in a letter to Mrs. Everard Cotes, which Susan Winnett quotes in “Coming Unstrung”:

I think your drama lacks a little line—bony structure and palpable, as it were, tense cord—on which to string the pearls of detail. It’s the frequent fault of women’s work—and I like a rope (the rope of the direction and march of the subject, the action) pulled, like a taut cable between a steamer and tug, from beginning to end. [Your plot] lapses on a trifle too liquidly. (516)

His eccentricities aside, James’s identification of “women’s work” with plots that lapse “a trifle too liquidly” might actually yield some useful insight, especially if we recollect the expansiveness of Ferrante’s imaginary of disintegration. There is, for instance, a set of key terms with clear typographical associations, such as smarginatura and squadernamento; there are those that are much more encompassing and nebulous, like frantumaglia; and there are, too, key terms, like discioglimento, that point to a process of disintegration-as-liquidation. In fact, there is in these novels a proliferation of bodily fluids that I read in light of Tony Tanner’s concept of the thalassic, a form of regression and “devolutionary collapse” (234) that he identifies in characters like Emma Bovary and Maggie Tulliver. Tanner’s exploration of the ways in which the structure of Madame Bovary and Emma herself tend to the liquid provide us with a valuable way of understanding how the very rigid separation between plot and other more “substantial” elements of narrative like characterization or atmosphere is no more than an illusion. That is, while these novels display a marked preoccupation with liquid imagery, their plots seem to also “lapse a trifle too liquidly,” so that even if James meant it as a criticism, his observation is accurate when it comes to many novels of female unorthodox formation. We have already hinted at why this

75 And, amusingly enough, advances the opposite view of women writers and plot than those who are sure Ferrante is a woman because her novels rely so heavily on plot. Two sides of the same prejudicial coin.
might be the case in our discussion of Fraiman and warring discourses in the previous chapter, yet it will hopefully become clearer as we continue with our investigation.

If Ortega y Gasset’s vision of plot is exclusively functional, we can begin to grasp why plot for him becomes “dead weight.” Instead, by recognizing, on the one hand, the indispensability of plot, and, on the other, multiple ways of plotting, we can begin to theorize about the results we might obtain when, as Winnett writes, “the ‘pearls of detail’ are strung differently—or not strung at all” (516). A word, however. While our main concern is to elucidate how the “pearls of detail” can be “strung differently,” I hesitate to affirm that they could ultimately be “not strung at all.” It is not only my suspicion but also the conviction behind the present study that, as in life, we are never truly free from plot in writing a story.76 Perhaps Elena’s is the only successful way of relating to plot today—by recognizing its force but also its arbitrariness, by giving way to it but also constantly destabilizing it.

By recognizing, too, its advantages. As our Foreword made clear, plotting always exhibits palliative qualities in Ferrante’s novels. These texts do not flaunt an ingenuous conception of plot, but one that is highly aware of the self’s need for fictions when faced with life’s ultimate meaninglessness. Which is why plot is palliative for Ferrante, not curative. This palliative quality is emphasized by Adriana Cavarero in Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti, where she writes of “il significato che salva la vita di ognuno dal mero succedersi degli eventi” (8) / “the meaning that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events” (2). Cavarero draws from Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on storytelling—“the story reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events” (quoted in Cavarero Relating, 2)—as

76 This is one of the central conceits of the Quartet: “A differenza che nei racconti, la vita vera, quando è passata, si sporge non sulla chiarezza ma sull’oscurità” (SBP 451) / “Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity” (SLC 473). A conceit, as I said, and a deceitful one at that, given that the Quartet is a racconto and that la vita vera has nothing to do with it.
well as Karen Blixens’—“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (quoted in Cavarero Relating, 2). It is important to note the relation between “sorrow” and “a mere (or intolerable) sequence of events.” Behind this conception of storytelling lies the belief that life in its pure state, without any sort of interpretation, is unbearable, even utterly inapprehensible. This might account for the human narrative impulse, and it might also explain why the presence of narrative in the history of humanity is both synchronic and diachronic. These anthropological observations are, nevertheless, beyond the scope of our work. What remains uncontestable is that for Ferrante’s women, as well as for Arendt, Blixen, and Cavarero, plotting is a palliative activity.

We can identify the plotting activity on different asymmetrical levels in L’amica geniale, three of which interest me in particular:

1) Elena plots her entire friendship with Lila as a way, among other things, to confront loss, i.e. Per calmarmi.

2) Within the plotted whole, we find the young friends constantly plotting as a way to front the harsh reality of the rione. In this case, plotting is a form of storytelling. Elena refers to the stories she and Lila told themselves to make sense of Don Achille’s murder: “C’era qualcosa di insostenibile nelle cose, nelle persone, nelle palazzine, nelle strade, che solo

77 Gambaro rightly emphasizes the importance of the Quartet’s division into storie: “la strategia di appaiare le stagioni dell’esistenza al sostantivo ‘storia,’ ogni volta ripetuto, ribadisce la centralità assoluta del nesso vita/scrittura” (“Il fascino” 173) / “the strategy of pairing up the seasons of existence with the noun ‘story,’ repeated every time, reaffirms the absolute centrality of the life/writing connection” (my translation); and Benedetti notes that, by doing away with the Storia that qualifies all installments, the English translation of the third volume (Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay) neglects to emphasize the narrative aspects of the works and the importance of storytelling (“Elena Ferrante in America” 20).

78 The notion of an unbearable life in its pure state is taken up in the Quartet when, discussing Beckett on the beach, Elena writes, about Lila, that “la vita allo stato puro la impauriva” (SNC 221) / “life in the pure state frightened her” (SNN 222).

79 As Brooks writes, “narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality” (xi).
reinventando tutto come in un gioco diventava accettabile” (AG 103) / “There was something unbearable in the things, in the people, in the buildings, in the streets that, only if you reinvented it all, as in a game, became acceptable” (MBF 106-07)

3) Also within the plotted whole, Elena and Lila plot continuously as a way to navigate and negotiate their formation in the rione. Related to 2), except that plot here relates more strictly to agency than storytelling, bordering at times on a conception of plot as complot. This is most evident in the months before Lila’s marriage, as if courtship facilitated the friends’ plotting: “Da quel momento il fine ultimo di tutto il nostro tramare ci sembrò quello: combattere con ogni mezzo contro l’intrusione di Marcello nella sua vita” (AG 240) / “From then on the ultimate goal of all our plotting seemed to us that—to fight by every means possible Marcello’s intrusion in her life” (MBF 244).80

Having previously discussed plot primarily in terms of order and demarcation, we will now slightly shift perspectives to emphasize its role as armature or armor—as protection against the intrusion of outside forces—forces, we posit, closely related to what Cavarero and Arendt deem unbearable. Of course, this is just a different way of approaching the same issue. Viewing plot as a shaping force emphasizes whatever ends up inside a novel; in this conception of plot, what interests us is both the material inside and the margins that delineate (and, therefore, give form) to it. Viewing plot, however, as armature or armor, as implicit too in the concept of demarcation, directs our attention to whatever lies outside the plotted ground. The abundant images of disintegration so relevant in the Quartet signal, in different ways, to the disintegration (or the dissolution) of the margins that keep the story in place, as well as the consequent intrusion of

80 This entire section, in fact, is representative of the potentialities of plot. As stated in the quote, there is a reference to tramare, and words like confabulare, orchestrazione, agire abound in these pages, raising questions about plotting, agency, and courtship. Fraiman’s study is helpful to navigate the position of women in novels of courtship.
what lies outside. We have come to the main point of enquiry of this chapter: the outside of a plot that has become smarginata, an outside that we briefly mentioned in the previous chapter when Elena refers to the niente in which Tina is lost, and which this chapter will treat both as frantumaglia and fabula, as the locus of the irrational impulses of a text highly charged with contradictions—impulses that cannot be fully reconciled with the kind of causality usually attributed to plot and that consequently tend to stay outside of more sanitized novels. While this locus cannot in itself constitute a story (in fact, it is antithetic to plot; it is life in its pure state), it nevertheless permeates L’amica geniale when the text is, as it were, perforated in its most destabilizing moments.

We previously came to the conclusion that there is no rest, that the beginning which had previously claimed precedence is ultimately subsumed under the plotting activity, and that the choice of a beginning is ultimately arbitrary. A caveat is in order: that beginnings are arbitrary does not diminish the role that the frantumaglia plays in the creation of these narratives. A Neapolitan word derived from the Italian frantumazione, or ‘breaking up into pieces,’ frantumaglia refers to a feeling of deep-seated instability that results from the recognition of life’s meaninglessness, from coming face to face with the tangle (garbuglio) underlying our existence. Ferrante has described it, in La frantumaglia, as “un paesaggio instabile, una massa aerea o acquatica di rottami all’infinito che si mostra all’io, brutalmente, come la sua vera e unica interiorità” (95) / “an unstable landscape, an infinite aerial or aquatic mass of debris that appears to the I, brutally, as its true and unique inner self” (100). Frantumaglia is the chaos that originates, literally through the dismemberment of the maternal body, but also metaphorically, through the moments of crisis that it brings about and that in turn result in an equilibrium, no less precarious than the pre-critical state, but that at least provides the self with a more acute
awareness of its condition. Like Kristeva’s abject and abjection, *frantumaglia* is both the
unnamable landscape and the reaction to it—it is both the raw material for artistic creation and
the feeling of unease that renders the creation necessary.

Ambra Pirri writes of the feminine qualities of this affect: “un senso di estraneità e di
perdita di sè che può accadere solo alle donne perché solo le donne sono costrette dall’ordine
maschile a rompersi nel cancellare se stesse” (64) / “a sense of alienation and loss of self that can
occur only to women because only women are forced by the male order to shatter in the process
of self-erasure” (my translation). In fact, both *frantumaglia* and the abject find their origin in the
maternal body. In Ferrante’s case, the maternal origin is twofold, for the term itself comes from
the mother while also ultimately referring back to her. *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante, writes, was a
word that her mother

usava per dire come si sentiva quando era tirata di qua e di là da impressioni
contraddittorie che la laceravano. … La frantumaglia (lei pronunciava frantummàglia) la
deprimeva. A volte le dava capogiri, le causava un sapore di ferro in bocca. Era la parola
per un malessere non altrimenti definibile. (94)

used to describe how she felt when she was racked by contradictory sensations that were
tearing her apart. The *frantumaglia* (she pronounced it *frantummàglia*) depressed her.
Sometimes it made her dizzy, sometimes it made her mouth taste like iron. It was the
word for a disquiet not otherwise definable. (99)

Curiously, Ferrante—whoever she is, we are concerned with the authorial persona put forth in
the collection *Frantumaglia*—has taken her mother’s term, in dialect, and translated it into
Italian, something that Elena certainly would have done, and perhaps both a testament to the
maternal inheritance and a form of abjection in itself. The indefinability and contradictory nature
of the feelings involved in *frantumaglia* bear un undeniable echo of Kristeva’s description of
abjection: “Quand je suis envahie par l’abjection, cette torsade faite d’affects et de pensées que
j’appelle ainsi, n’a pas proprement à proprement parler d’*objet* définissable” (9) / “When I am
beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have,
properly speaking, a definable object. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or
imagine” (1). Kristeva here brings us to yet another image of convergence, the *torsade* (“twisted
braid”) which finds a close correlative in Gadda’s and Ferrante’s *garbuglio* and presents itself as
another version of Fraiman’s alternative geometry of female development.81

Yet just as *fabula* is only ever accessible through *sjužet*, *frantumaglia* is only attainable
through the workings of plot, even if the latter case is not as clear-cut as the well-defined
narratological concepts of the Formalists. In ways in which it will hopefully become evident,
*frantumaglia* is both cause and effect. Insofar as effect, *frantumaglia* is affect, the “parola per un
malessere non altrimenti definibile” that left in the mouth of Ferrante’s mother “un sapore di
ferro in bocca” (the consonance between *ferro*—iron—and Ferrante hint at the centrality of the
concept of *frantumaglia* in the author’s oeuvre). Insofar as cause, *frantumaglia* wavers
somewhere between the affective and spatial. Ferrante employs imagery to describe it that often
suggests what we could call an affective space, a “landscape of debris,” and she describes, in *La
frantumaglia*, the pain of Delia and Olga as “affacciarsi sulla frantumaglia” (96) / “looking onto

81 An additional interesting parallel arises between Kristeva’s abject and *frantumaglia*. The abjection *par excellence* is the abjection of the maternal body, which need to be banished in order for the infant to
develop a sense of identity separate from the mother. Ferrante, similarly, speaks of birth—both of giving
birth and being born—as the original and originary *frantumaglia*: “frantumazione originaria che è mettere
al mondo-venire al mondo. Parlo del sentirsi madre a prezzo di espellere un frammento vivo del proprio
corpo; parlo di un sentirsi figlia come frammento di un corpo intero e ineguagliabile” (215-16) / “that sort
of original fragmentation that is bringing into the world-coming into the world. I mean feeling oneself a
mother at the price of getting rid of a living fragment of one’s own body; I mean feeling oneself a
daughter as a fragment of a whole and incomparable body” (224).
the frantumaglia” (101). Affacciarsi connotes the act of exposing oneself in order to look out, say, a window. It thus separates the subject from the frantumaglia while hinting at the transgression of boundaries, the overstepping of a frontier.

Two things, closely related, are worth noting from this conception of the term. In conceiving of frantumaglia in a spatial way, we can begin to link the term to Ferrante’s other overarching, highly charged concept, one that stands at the very center of the Quartet: smarginatura, rendered by Goldstein as “dissolving margins.” One of the things that interests me most about the Quartet is the marriage of the text’s central disintegrative metaphor—smarginatura—with the structure of the novel. We will go into a more detailed discussion of the term and the ways in which my interpretation of the term differs from Goldstein’s. For the moment, we posit that smarginatura allows for the entry of frantumaglia, and in the process destabilizes one’s understanding of the world by doing away with the margins of things, whatever delineates them and gives them shape (and thus, form, identity). In Lila’s experience of it, “una cosa si smarginava e pioveva su un’altra, era tutto uno sciogliersi di materie eterogenee, un confondersi e rimescolarsi” (SBP 162) / “an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing” (SLC 175-76). The imagery is liquid, suggestive of Tanner’s “dissolving liquefactions of passion.” Things “rain” onto one another; they “melt” and lose their shape. In this sense, Goldstein is certainly faithful in her

82 Gallippi claims that “smarginatura brings to mind shamanic or mystic experiences” (108). My understanding of it is structural as it relates to plot and thematic insofar as the typographical metaphor signals to textual disintegration (whether the text of the self or the world). As Milkova states, “the verb ‘cancellare’ (erase) appears with respect to both Amalia’s identity and Lila’s (who erases all traces of herself), always in relation to women and images of women, thereby charting a trajectory from Ferrante’s first novel to her most recent work, linking the gypsy painting to Lila’s wedding photograph” (“Elena Ferrante’s Visual Poetics” 170). While I do not, many scholars treat smarginatura and frantumaglia as interchangeable; Mazzanti, for instance, calls the former a “fenomeno di scissione identico” (100) / “phenomenon of division identical” (my translation) to frantumaglia.
translation of the term, at least in its connotation if not in its denotation. Nonetheless, via the denotative dimension of the term, this chapter approaches *smarginatura* formally and extends it to the overall structure of the Quartet.

*Smarginatura* means to either trim the margins of a sheet of paper or to print outside said margins. In English, the latter (whatever is printed beyond the edge of where the sheet will be trimmed) is called the Bleed (already we see echoes of the liquid imagery from the passage above). Thematically, this implies the dissolution of semantic certainties—the unsettling of networks of meaning—because, lacking a boundary or a margin, things cease to be stable. Structurally, the implications are larger and illustrate a current in Ferrante’s *oeuvre* that comments on the inability of fictions to account for certain absences (or, in Ferrantean terms, to plug up the leaks or holes in meaning). Narratologically, to go beyond the margins means to step into the territory of the unnarrated and, more importantly, the unnarratable. This, then, is connected to my second point about a spatial conception of *frantumaglia*. In conceiving both of these destabilizing terms spatially and proceeding to view them, insofar as they are the raw material of the narrative, as *fabula*, we can begin to see the moments in the Quartet in which *smarginatura* causes fissures in the narration as the destabilizing intrusion of the *fabula* into the plot. In this interpretation, the margins that are dissolved (or, literally, trimmed off) are the margins of the story, or, in a word, plot itself. If plot is an organizing force, it is firstly charged with demarcating, establishing a beginning and an end.

During this disintegrative process, the positionality of the text remains internal, yet with an outward look. This is perhaps one of the central tenets of Ferrantean writing. In *La frantumaglia*, she writes: “Perciò i racconti tanto più sono efficaci, quanto più sono parapetti da cui si può guardare tutto quello che è rimasto fuori” (209) / “Which is why the more effective
stories resemble ramparts from which one can gaze out at everything that has been excluded” (217). Time and again, we find in these novels the chronotope of the marginal or the liminal, as exemplified by the proliferation of parapets, railings, terraces, landings, banisters, especially during tense or meaningful moments.\(^{83}\) To name a few: Don Achille leans over the bannister to remind the girls that he has remunerated them for the loss of their dolls; Lila’s first episode of smarginatura happens on a terrace, as her brother (on whom this affect is focused) leans over the parapet; as Lidia and Melina fall down the stairs, Elena is struck by the shocking image of Melina’s head hitting the floor of the landing.\(^{84}\) While these physical spaces play a crucial role in the narrative and most strongly emphasize the marginal chronotope, the text itself is, by extension, in a constant state of liminality, as Ferrante’s quote above suggests. This internal positionality—manifested in Elena’s role as witness to and narrator of Lila’s episode of smarginatura—is what allows for the novel at large to maintain its sense of emplotment. It is, too, what keep us reading and one of the various reasons that has led many to see in Ferrante an heiress to the nineteenth-century serialists. During the episodes of smarginatura, this positionality is at once accentuated (we see Lila through Elena’s gaze—face [affacciarsi] onto the frantumaglia through the parapet of plot) and also compromised, for there is always the threat that, even if the act of witnessing is removed, outside forces might intrude and dissolve the plot.

\(^{83}\) Bakhtin: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature… it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)… Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope…. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (84-85).

\(^{84}\) In I giorni dell’abbandono, Olga will first see the apparition of the poverella beside the banister, a clear manifestation of the boundaries that have been violated (in this case, chronological boundaries as well).
But what, precisely, lies outside the bounds of plot? What else, beside what Ferrante herself writes about frantumaglia, can we infer about that space based on the moments when the text becomes smarginato? We have hinted that it is one and the same with the niente where Tina disappears. Having discussed Tina as a figure of arrested plot, of plot gone wrong, can we posit the existence of a space that serves as repository of discarded plots? Or, acknowledging the “nothingness” of such a space—for how can niente be anything, let alone a space?—can it be the locus of potentiality? I mean this in the Aristotelian sense, as derived from the Ancient Greek word dunamis (δύναμις), and thus as denoting any possibility attributed to something, and, implicitly, the possibility to become or be shaped into something else. It is opposed to the notion of actuality, which represents the fulfillment of such a possibility. Now, if Aristotle believed prime matter to be pure potentiality, unshaped and therefore devoid of properties, is it possible to find a narratological analogue in our concept of fabula or frantumaglia insofar as both constitute the raw material with which a story is constructed? Furthermore, if Aristotle contrasts the pure potentiality of prime matter to the pure actuality of form, can we reformulate our conception of narrative form and the formal impulse—of plot as a shaping force—as an actuation of the potentialities of this narrative raw material? Such a conception reconfigures the space outside the bounds of plot (“quello che è rimasto fuori”) as the space containing plots that could have been but were not (e.g. Gennaro as Nino’s son, as we shall discuss), or were supposed to be but ended up not being (e.g. Tina), or were mistaken or misread (e.g. the fairy tale plot).

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85 Can the Aristotelian framework accommodate our view of the text’s metabolic functions? We have mentioned that the hypothyroidic last storia exhibits a deficiency in its catabolic functions. Consequent to this process is a surfeit of anabolism, and thus the tendency to complexity, to build up, to shape; but because there is no energy to shape, the text breaks down. Can we understand this malfunction as the failure of form to actuate the potentialities of narrative pure matter?
A seemingly unimportant scene from the Quartet conforms to this conception of potential plots that eventually are discarded. Some time after Tina’s disappearance, Lila recollects that she once thought Gennaro was Nino’s son:

«A me pareva proprio così, il bambino era identico a lui, la sua copia».
«Vuoi dire che un desiderio può essere così forte da sembrare già realizzato?».
«No, voglio dire che per qualche anno Gennaro è stato veramente il figlio di Nino».
«Non esagerare».

Mi fissò per un attimo con malizia, fece qualche passo per il bagno zoppicando, scoppiò a ridere in un modo un po’ artificiale. (SBP 350)

“To me he really seemed so, he was identical to Nino, his exact image.”
“You mean that a desire can be so strong as to seem fulfilled?”
“No, I mean that for a few years Gennaro was truly Nino’s child.”
“Don’t exaggerate.”

She stared at me spitefully for a moment, she took a few steps in the bathroom, limping, she burst out laughing in a slightly artificial way. (SLC 368-69)

Moments later, Lila continues: “per un po’ mi sono cresciuta un figlio di Nino, proprio come tu hai fatto con Imma, un figlio in carne e ossa; ma quando quel figlio è diventato il figlio di Stefano dov’è finito il figlio di Nino, ce l’ha ancora Gennaro dentro di sé, ce l’ho io?” (351-52) / “For a while I brought up Nino’s child, just as you’ve done with Imma, a flesh and blood child; but when that child became Stefano’s where did Nino’s child go, does Gennaro still have him inside, do I have him?” (SLC 370).

These words reach Elena’s ears as “affirmations of derailment,” to quote another Ferrantean heroine. In a way, they are, but not in the more idiomatic sense that Olga, in I giorni
dell’abbandono, probably means by them, and thus as euphoric or delusional. Instead, like with smarginatura, I read the word derailment in a more literal sense, namely, as a manifestation of the tangentiality represented by alternative plots. If orthodox conceptions of plot and Elena’s own plotting have a clear sense of direction, much like the tracks of a train, alternative plots represent the threat of deflection \(^{86}\) (this, of course, entails a destabilization of direction and purpose, and therefore of intention and plotting itself). Derailment is also “a symptom of a thought disorder in which one constantly gets ‘off the track’ in one’s thoughts and speech; similar to loosening of association” (“derailment”). Considering that plot inevitably carries with it a sense of association, Lila, as the novel’s central figure of entanglement (or Fraiman’s alternative geometry), is constantly a source of derailment, of disassociation. She is the text’s main source of tension to the extent that she is the novel’s central concern but also the biggest threat to its linearity. Lila is, in other words, what separates Ferrante from most nineteenth-century serialists. Whereas Elena engages in this form of thought more than once—she explicitly wonders what her life would have been like if Lila had taken the admission exam to the scuola media with her and, at one point, even goes into a detailed speculative description of her life as Antonio’s wife—her imaginative exercises retain a primarily speculative quality, while, in the example quoted above, Lila speaks of something more, as it were, real.

If we accept Lila’s assertion that Gennaro truly was Nino’s son when she believed him to be, have we arrived at a different level of the text, one that comments not on its mimetic qualities, but rather on our reading habits? For didn’t Lila’s certainty of this paternity also

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\(^{86}\) Brooks sees plot as inherently connected to detour and digression (and, by extension, deviance). We will discuss this in the following chapter, but for now I’d like to emphasize my understanding of digression and deflection as forces that are, not inherent to the forward direction of plot (regardless of its retrospective glance), but rather sources of derailment that threaten to “distract” plot. In this sense, we can see them as working horizontally or diagonally. We must always keep in mind the relation between “direction” and “intention.”
constitute, by default, our own certainty? And did not that certainty influence our exegesis of the text, or the ways that, in reading, we also plotted? The paternity plot becomes layered; on one level, Nino as father, and, beneath it, the reality of Stefano’s paternity. Lila, we find, has once again misread the signs of Gennaro’s paternity, much as she misread the fairy tale/ogre plot. But if Lila misreads, prompting us to literally misread, does this render the “original” plot useless, or, as Elena suggests, inexistent and simply an illusion of desire?

I used the word layered just now, but perhaps using the word forked grants us a different perspective and allows us to envision the plotting activity as violent not only in its imposition of causality but also, and related to this, in its forfeit of all other possible plots. This is akin to the workings of hypertext fiction, a subgenre that often provides commentary on our reading habits. The word “forked” also brings us into Borgesian territory; much like Albert in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Lila acknowledges the multiplication of possible plots that occurs every time she makes a decision. Her glance—unlike Elena’s, which is forward or backward—is sideways, and thus constantly destabilizing, caught up in reflections about the narrative locus where plots, lacking viability, become discarded. From the inside of the text, Lila almost metatextually alludes to that which has been abjected or banished outside the boundaries of plot but which nevertheless continues to trespass. Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* is an obvious precursor here. Santovetti rightly points out that “while Calvino’s hypernovel … aims to represent the potential multiplicity of reality including all discarded variants, Ferrante’s novel stages the residual dimension of writing, the element that slips away, that denies itself, that resists” and goes on to note, quite rightly, that “for both writers the ‘antinovel’ is a way to rehabilitate the novel as a genre, but while Calvino devises a modular structure, Ferrante revisits, and brings new energy to, the nineteenth-century format” (“Melodrama” 543).
One of the manifestations of this new energy might be found in the ways in which discarded plots penetrate the text and become inscribed in the body. Chapter 1 mentioned how this occurred through the constipation suffered by Lila and Alfonso. It is also worth noting that, in the passage quoted above, the allusion to the discarded plot of Nino’s paternity is accompanied by Lila’s mocking imitation of Elena’s limp. Throughout the novel, Elena expresses a deep-seated fear that her mother will catch up with her. This idiom takes on a figurative and a literal valence if we consider Immacolata’s limp, a trait that Elena continually chooses to highlight through a technique that Benedetti retraces to the epic: “questa ‘gamba offesa’ ricorre puntuale negli accenni alla madre nel romanzo, secondo un procedimento epico forse troppo scoperto” (“Il linguaggio” 176) / “this ‘damaged leg’ promptly recurs every time her mother is mentioned in the novel, through an epic technique that is perhaps too evident” (my translation). Matrophobia is physically translated into the fear of being caught up by the limping mother. And as a result of running away from Immacolata, Elena runs into Lila, the friend an escape from the mother, the friendship plot a substitute for the maternal. In fact, the connection between these two characters is not to be overlooked, as must not be the significance of Elena’s terror when she begins to limp in the seventh month of her pregnancy, when the threat of becoming her mother is one and the same with the impending transition into becoming a mother (again, always the threat of an alternative plot).

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87 Once again, the figure of the walk or andatura: “Qualcosa mi convinse, allora, che se fossi andata sempre dietro a lei, alla sua andatura, il passo di mia madre, che mi era entrato nel cervello e non ne usciva più, avrebbe smesso di minacciarmi” (AG 42) / “Something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with her, at her pace, my mother’s limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn’t come out, would stop threatening me” (MBF 46). And: “Lei e la mia amica, che pure erano state da sempre, per me, l’una il rovescio dell’altra, in quelle notti finirono spesso per combaciare” (SBP 67) / “She and my friend, although they had always been, for me, the opposite of one another, in those nights often came together.” (SLC 77).
A dramatic change in perspective occurs after Immacolata’s death, however, as Elena embraces her limp: “Mi coltivai quel fastidio come un lascito custodito nel mio stesso corpo” (SBP 207) / “I nurtured that pain like a bequest preserved in my body” (SLC 222). An analogue situation unfolds in L’amore molesto. Both Delia and Elena exhibit a marked desire to possess Amalia and Immacolata after their deaths, a desire that is before anything else physical, and that, as such, is often reconfigured either through garments or storytelling or both. Ferrante’s treatment of plot as thread begins (and is perhaps most developed) in L’amore molesto, where fabric and the fabrication of stories become synonymous through the act of sewing. Insofar as sewing is linked to storytelling, it can bring about subjectivity, as Mandolini points out: “the activity of sewing itself, an occupation that is traditionally associated with the seclusion of female labor … and that in Amalia’s case had been cause of economic exploitation, is precisely the source from which the renewed subjectivity of the protagonist springs” (286). But sewing is, of course, also a metaphor for the semantic potentialities of storytelling. The “thread of the story” becomes significant here, as does the ultimate realization that the end product is patchwork, a makeshift remedy to life’s obscurity. Although perhaps remedy is not the most suitable word; as Chapter 4 and our conclusion will discuss, Ferrante’s novels provide with a vindication of the obscure, reworked in specific ways in every novel but always indexing some form of semantic ambiguity. In L’amore molesto, this ambiguity surrounds the story of Amalia’s death, yet it extends to the city of Naples as well, prompting us to follow the thread of Delia’s story until we are confronted with the faces of Ariadne, the Minotaur, and Theseus. I invoke these figures not simply because Delia clearly (and cleverly) does, but because their myth introduces the image of the labyrinth, central to Ferrante’s discussion, in La frantumaglia, of a

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88 Do we see echoes here of Irigaray’s 1981 essay on mother-daughter relationships? “What I wanted from you Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive” (quoted in Hirsch 137).
potential female city: “Dove ha origine il labirinto,” she asks, “quando ci si addestra all’arte di
perdersi?” (135) / “Where is the origin of the labyrinth, when is one schooled in the art of getting
lost?” (143). *The art of getting lost.* Is this passive form coterminous with the art of losing that
we discussed in the Foreword? What sort of savoir do both of these arts put forth? Ferrante
continues:

Se Teseo è fermo all’incapacità di orientarsi, è la piccola Arianna che custodisce l’arte di
smarrirsi, è lei che possiede il filo capace di governare il perdersi. Ho amato molto quel
mito, fin da bambina. Non escludo che quel giorno a Napoli, sotto il temporale, io abbia
pensato ad Arianna, né escludo di aver pensato a lei molti anni dopo, raccontando di
Delia che vaga per la città e intanto si smarrisce nella sua infanzia. (136)
If Theseus is stopped at the incapacity to orient himself, it’s little Ariadne who preserves
the art of getting lost, it’s she who possesses the thread that can control it. I’ve loved this
myth since I was a child. It’s very possible that that day in Naples, in the storm, I thought
of Ariadne, and that I thought of her many years later, describing Delia who, wandering
through the city, gets lost in her childhood. (144)

What we encounter here is a savoir that invokes the obscure act of getting lost and recuperates it
as a form of comfort in chaos, or rather, of negative capability, the capacity “of being in
uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 92).
It might strike us as paradoxical for Ferrante to speak of a “filo capace di governare il
perdersi”—if we are in control of getting lost, do we not cease to be lost?—yet the poetics of
storytelling at the base her novels is precisely this making oneself at home in the *frantumaglia*, in
the spatial coordinates of the obscure, a word I continue to use because it encapsulates the
epistemological uncertainty that Keats favored and is conveyed through the darkness
characteristic of the topography of Ferrante’s novels. So that if the chronotope of the marginal
(and thus of smarginatura) indexes the intrusion of the frantumaglia into the plot and is
materialized in the proliferation of parapets, railing, and landings in the text, what we encounter
here, the chronotope of the frantumaglia, is instead manifested in the countless obscure spaces
that populate the novels: in the literal darkness of tunnels, basements, and cellars, as well as in
the epistemic darkness of the labyrinth invoked by Ferrante (replicated structurally in L’amore
molestol and in all the inexplicable occurrences of the Quartet). We will return to these obscure
spaces in our conclusion, but by now it should be evident that, albeit the site of ambiguity and
contradiction, they represent the ground on which storytelling can and must grow, or rather, the
ground on which only the thread of a story can guide us, as it did Theseus.

But it isn’t to Theseus that Ferrante attributes control of the thread. “È la piccola Arianna
che custodisce l’arte di smarrirsi,” she tells us. Like Adriana Cavarero, Ferrante conceives of the
art of storytelling as a feminine one. In fact, the chief reason for my digression into the myth of
the Minotaur is that I find in the litterinthine yet another dominant figure of resistance against
linearity—not incidentally is it essential to “The Garden of Forking Paths”—reformulated as an
iteration of the alternative geometry of female development I have been speaking of. Female
development understood as Bildung, certainly, but also as the unfolding of a plotted text and the
“stringing of the pearls of detail.” This is evidently a gendered dynamic; after all, Ferrante’s
invocation of the labyrinth is part of a larger discussion on the possibility of a female city, which
can only be articulated through a descent “dentro il labirinto della nostra infanzia, nella
frantumaglia irredebla del nostro passato prossimo e remoto” (138) / “into the labyrinth of our
childhood, into the unredeemed chaos of fragments of our past and our remote past” (147). But

89 Note that the term frantumaglia gets lost in translation.
in the labyrinth of the *frantumaglia*, Ferrante warns, we must be careful not to be lost “senza arte, senza filo” (142) / “without art, without a thread” (150). We must proceed without “irritable reaching after fact and reason” but cannot do so without a story; the pearls, in other words, cannot remain unstrung, even if, as I said before, the end product is patchwork and simply a makeshift remedy to life’s obscurity.

Which is exactly the case of *L’amore molesto*, in which Delia acknowledges the simultaneous arbitrariness and necessity of following one thread of her mother’s story. In this case, following the thread is a means to process. Delia is the first of Ferrante’s heroines to realize that the only way of coming to terms with the mother is to fully possess her, an exercise most efficiently done through storytelling and, not coincidentally, through wearing the mother’s clothes as a way of possessing the maternal body (and her story). As Giancarlo Lombardi states, “Delia ritrova la madre, e fa del suo corpo il proprio corpo, un corpo seviziato, abusato e ingiuriato dall’autorità fallocentrica” (288) / “Delia recovers her mother (finds her again), and makes her body her own, a body that’s been tortured, abused, and injured by the phallocentric authority” (my translation). The possession of the mother through her clothes and through the telling of her story are activities that work to preserve and make last, and, in Delia’s case, as some scholars have argued, to process and overcome patriarchal violence.\(^90\) The impulse to preserve is displayed in Elena, too, who states that the reason for embracing the limp was a desire to preserve her mother: “Il mio senso di colpa voleva costringerla a durare” (*SBP* 207) / “My sense of guilt wanted to compel her to endure” (*SLC* 222).\(^91\) This desire, needless to say, is one and the same with the plotting impulse, as becomes evident in Elena’s own rationalizations.

\(^{90}\) de Rogatis: “Clothing therefore is a metaphor not only for desire but also for reparation (and repairing), of which Amalia’s work as a seamstress is emblematic” (“Metamorphosis” 200).

\(^{91}\) We come, once again, to the murky relationship between *colpa*/guilt and the plotting activity outlined in the first chapter.
about abrogating the power to write Lila’s story: “Io amavo Lila. Volevo che lei durasse. Ma volevo essere io a farla durare” (SBP 441) / “I loved Lila. I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last” (SLC 463).\(^{92}\)

As regards the limp, we have there a representation of plot incarnate. Elena’s willing adoption of her mother’s walk is the closest the novel can come to dramatizing the physical possession of the mother; it borders on the cannibalistic,\(^{93}\) since only through the ritualistic consumption of the maternal body can the maternal plot be processed, or, to return to our previous discussion, properly digested. In fact, Lila immediately follows her mocking imitation of Elena’s limp with a much less derisive admission that, in adopting the walk, Elena has managed to stop being a daughter in order to truly become a mother. Plot can be and often is inscribed in the body, much in the ways in which the previous chapter discussed Lila’s swelling and Alfonso’s constipation. Lila’s disappearance, in fact, can be read as the ultimate manifestation of this process, insofar as the literal self-effacement is a physical reconfiguration (and reappropriation) of what Fraiman calls the “cacophonous discourse about female formation” that dictates self-effacement.

But if Elena’s adoption of her mother’s limp represents a plot successfully metabolized, then perhaps it will not give us as much insight into the space outside the margins of plot which we ventured out to explore in this chapter. Lila’s swelling and Alfonso’s constipation, on the

\(^{92}\) Interestingly, Michele Solara uses the exact same words about his desire to make Lila last (farla durare).

\(^{93}\) Freud points out a parallel between the emergence of cannibalism and the process through which one takes possession of the object-choice through identification. “Looked at from another point of view, this process of converting an erotic object-choice into an ego-alteration can also be seen as a device enabling the ego to gain control of the id and strengthen its links to it, albeit at the cost of showing considerable complaisance with regard to its experiences. When the ego adopts the features of the object, it so to speak presses itself on the id as a love-object; it seeks to make good the id’s loss by saying ‘There, you see, you can love me too – I look just like the object.’” (120).
other hand, have already provided us with valuable insight into the effects of arrested plots, yet they remain figures, posterior to the dissolution of margins. If we want to explore the moment of rupture, we have to turn to the moments in the text in which either Elena or Lila experience smarginatura, and when, as I have been suggesting, the text itself becomes smarginato. Although there are several instances, the earthquake episode seems particularly relevant. It is, for one, the instance in which smarginatura shifts from the affective to the geological, a jump from the figural to the literal which subverts our understanding of the term. It is also the first time that Lila uses the term smarginatura and arguably the last time she experiences it so vividly, once again underlining the power of the retrospective glance to unify discrete moments under the utterance. Perhaps coincidentally, there is, as with the dolls, a trebling of sorts with Lila’s episodes of smarginatura, at least those that the text presents in a direct manner: first, during New Year’s Eve of 1958, then, in San Giovanni a Teduccio in 1969, and finally, during the earthquake of 1980. If the “incantatory” trebling of the dolls allows for the daughter/dolls connection—allows, we might even say, for the disappearance itself—what kind of power can we attribute to the trebling of the smarginatura episodes?

Is the result of this trebling the ultimate smarginatura of the text? But did we not assert that Tina’s disappearance was the incident which marked the ultimate dissolution of the plot? Do we conclude that each trebling works toward the same end but on a different level—the dolls on the thematic level anticipate the loss of Tina, while the episodes of smarginatura work on the level of structure? Any answer to these questions would be premature. What remains indisputable is the earthquake’s effect on Elena and Lila’s sense of sequence and consequence:

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94 I choose to use the Italian participle for practical matters. In English, smarginato would be awkwardly rendered as “that from which the margins have been trimmed.”

95 They are also symmetrically divided—eleven years between each episode.
Il terremoto – il terremoto del 23 novembre 1980 con quel suo frantumare infinito – ci entrò dentro le ossa. Cacciò via la consuetudine della stabilità e della solidità, la certezza che ogni attimo sarebbe stato identico a quello seguente, la familiarità dei suoni e dei gesti, la loro sicura riconoscibilità. Subentrò il sospetto verso ogni rassicurazione, la tendenza a credere a ogni profezia di sventura, un’attenzione angosciata ai segni della friabilità del mondo, e fu arduo riprendere il controllo. (SBP 158)

The earthquake—the earthquake of November 23, 1980, with its infinite destruction—entered into our bones. It expelled the habit of stability and solidity, the confidence that every second would be identical to the next, the familiarity of sounds and gestures, the certainty of recognizing them. A sort of suspicion of every form of reassurance took over, a tendency to believe in every prediction of bad luck, an obsessive attention to signs of the brittleness of the world, and it was hard to take control again. (SLC 172)

We have, on the one hand, the word frantumare96 used to describe the earthquake’s destructive force. In its “shattering” potential, the earthquake reveals any sense of continuity to be mere contiguity; it shares with Ferrante’s concept of frantumaglia “l’effetto del senso di perdita, quando si ha la certezza che tutto ciò che ci sembra stabile, duraturo, un ancoraggio per la nostra vita, andrà a unirsi presto a quel paesaggio di detriti che ci pare di vedere” (95) / “an effect of the sense of loss, when we’re sure that everything that seems to us stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of debris that we seem to see” (100). We can therefore say that its disruption is affective, spreading over to the epistemological, and, by extension, on to the...

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96 Which Goldstein translates as “destruction.” This would have been a suitable choice, were it not that it overlooks the vividness of the more literal “shattering” or “crumbling” and, more importantly, its clear allusion to frantumaglia.
narrative. Once again, the earthquake blurs the lines between the metaphorical and the literal, the debris both concrete and affective.

Its disruption is, first and foremost, geological and thus literal. We have previously noted Ferrante’s penchant for literalizing metaphors of disintegration, an impulse that, as many others, takes place on different levels of the narrative. In altering her wedding photograph, for instance, Lila literalizes and transfers the effacement imposed on her onto the canvas, so that the disfigured photographed woman becomes a literal representation of the flesh-and-bone person pulled apart by warring discourses of formation. “The self-mutilated photo,” Wehling-Giorgi writes, “stands as one of the novels’ central visual metaphors of resistance against the colonization of the female body” (“Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels” 208), and continues to assert that “the focus on the deformed and dislocated body is Ferrante’s way of expressing her female protagonists’ resistance to a deep sense of subalternity” (210). Elena interprets the modification as an act of insurgence, a sublimation placed at the service of making tangible Lila’s fury and providing a sustainable way to express the desire to cancellarsi (erase herself).97

“In cutting and concealing her body,” Milkova writes, “[Lila] invalidates her own self-objectification, nullifies her body modeled on fashion magazines. In this way, she also destroys the wedding dress and what it represents: marital abuse and subjugation” (“Elena Ferrante’s Visual Poetics” 175). That this is unnoticeable to most others in the rione is not relevant; if

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97 It is significant that many of Ferrante’s disintegrative terms are typographical (smarginatura, cancellatura, indentatura). They serve as a constant reminder that the self is a type of text and that the insurgence of the self can be an insurgence against dominant inherited narratives, both in terms of gender and genre. They also remind us that the desire to erase oneself or one’s script entails a form of actual textual destruction. It is no coincidence that Lila leaves no writing behind (even though so much is made of it). More interestingly, two very important instances of textual destruction bookend the second installment: Elena’s destruction of Lila’s diaries, and Lila’s destruction of La fata blu, both traces of Lila’s presence in Elena’s writing. Thus, their burning is simultaneously a burning of the evidence of collaborative authorship.
anything, it is to be expected—the indecipherability⁹⁸ of the photograph-turned-artwork a stand-
in for the indecipherability of a character who fails to conform to social scripts and, as such, remains illegible. We speak here, however, of a literalization as sublimation, which is not exactly the case with the earthquake, neither art nor in any way within Lila’s (or Elena’s) control, as the alteration of the photograph is. We stated before that one of the critiques levelled at L’amica geniale was its lack of symbolic subtlety, to which we responded that such a critique failed to take into account the commentary the novel is advancing on plotting, and more generally, the artificiality of fiction as discussed by Genette. Is the case the same with the earthquake? Surely, the specificity of the event represents a form of historical intrusion that cannot be ascribed simply to the affectedness of fiction. Is the earthquake the epitome of what Kermode has called a “surplus of signifiers”? Is it to be archived with other natural disasters in novels?

The flood at the end of The Mill and the Floss comes to mind. Much ink has been spilled in trying to interpret what many see as Eliot’s deus ex machina. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that the flood represents all that Maggie and Tom have repressed in order to adjust to the roles ascribed to them as man and woman. She also sees in the force of the flood a manifestation of Maggie’s “passion unrecognized, repressed, roiling up to bear them down; … her dammed-up selfhood and her passionate desire for life, which cannot be repressed” (18). Inasmuch as the event is a deus ex machina, this “passion unrecognized” could also be attributed to Eliot, as scholars have done. Susan Fraiman, in keeping with her discussion of genre and gender, suggests that the concurrent death of the siblings marks “a moment when their narratives collide for the

⁹⁸ A similar moment can be found in I giorni, when Olga creates “un unico corpo di mostruosa indecifrabilità futurista” (184) / “a single body of monstrous futurist indecipherability” (164) out of body parts from her and her family taken from photographs. Both moments bring to mind Frankenstein and what a Lacanian reading might term as its commentary on the fragmented nature of human experience, our patchwork identity. Lila, like Frankenstein, in many ways attributes to herself the signifiers imposed on her. But she does it with a vengeance.
last time, and now Tom’s upward-bound Bildungsroman is fatally assimilated to Maggie’s downward spiral. Little to celebrate except the negation of a story that, failing to work for Maggie, is finally discarded altogether” (141).

This last point is particularly relevant to our discussion of the plots in L’amica geniale that, lacking viability, end up being discarded. It also informs, though it does not predict, Lila’s decision to disappear. Yet something else seems to be at work in the episode of the earthquake. The functionality suggestive of a deus ex machina that one could attribute to Eliot’s flood—be it to express her own rage or Maggie’s, or to clash the irreconcilable narratives of brother and sister—is absent from the earthquake episode. No matter how one looks at it or what conclusion one wants to arrive at, the flood allows Eliot to get rid of her two characters. The earthquake, on the other hand, has absolutely no repercussions on the sjužet of L’amica geniale. No one dies, and no chain of events is unleashed by it, its only apparent result to elicit an affective response from Lila and Elena (and a further revelation of Nino’s characters). That this disaster would make its way into the narrative one way or another is expected; after all, the novel tends to make reference (even if tangentially) to social and political events, especially in the third installment, so that not mentioning the earthquake might have been too obvious an omission. On the other hand, the episode occupies too central a place in the narrative. Take, for instance, the Piazza Fontana bombing of December 12th, 1969. Elena makes it a point to narrate that she was in Milan when the bomb at the Banca dell’Agricoltora exploded, but she brushes off the event as if it had been of no importance. That Elena does away with the account of a bombing in the same city where she is, at a time when she is pregnant (just as she is pregnant when the earthquake happens) makes evident the narration’s whimsical preoccupations. 99 It is, too, a sign of what

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99 I give this example because of its social relevance. Other highly relevant events, albeit more personal, that the narration flies over are the births of Elena’s three daughters. The first two deliveries are, for
Raffaele Donnarumma calls Ferrante’s “intelligenza del presente” (147). One of the strengths of *L’amica geniale*, Donnarumma contends, is precisely the lateral stance that it takes in relation to the great events of the time: “I personaggi dell’Amica geniale, infatti, sono attraversati dalle trasformazioni che la storia italiana conosce dal dopoguerra a oggi, ma non sono ne i protagonisti della grande storia, ne ... le sue vittime. La storia li tocca, certo, ma li lascia sempre ai propri margini: cambia la loro condizione, non la loro natura” (146) / “The characters of *L’amica geniale*, in fact, are affected by the transformations known to Italian history from the postwar period to today, but they are neither the protagonists of this great history, nor ... their victims. History touches them, of course, but it always leaves them on the margins: it changes their condition, but not their nature” (my translation).

Donnarummas’s argument is compelling, but it does not directly address the narrative issues that preoccupy me. If we come to the somewhat obvious conclusion that the earthquake occupies a central place in Elena’s narration because she explicitly wants it to, the question arises, as it did with the episode of the dolls: to what end? Needless to say, any attempt to psychologize the episode is futile—intention not being attributable to geology. If, on the other hand, we venture into Genettian territory once again, another possibility suggests itself. Moments before the earthquake, Lila and Elena are having a conversation about Marcello’s introduction of drugs into the rione. As is often the case in the novel, a couple of Lila’s statements suffice to light up Elena’s thoughts. Fascinated by her friend’s way of thinking and influencing others, Elena reflects: “Dovrei scrivere come lei parla, lasciare voragini, costruire ponti e non finirli, costringere il lettore a fissare la corrente” (*SBP* 155) / “I should write the way she speaks, leave abysses, construct bridges and not finish them, force the reader to establish the flow” (*SLC* 169).

instance, not only superficially mentioned and done away with in two sentences, but also buried in the middle of a paragraph. The third at least begins a chapter.
That this assertion comes a mere two paragraphs before the earthquake seems hardly to be a coincidence. Can we posit a connection between the kind of rupture that Elena identifies in Lila’s writing (it is significant that Elena jumps from Lila’s way of thinking to her way of writing) and the kind of geological rupture occasioned by the earthquake? Can we speak of an *irruption* into the novel caused by the geological—and, by extension, narrative—rupture of the earthquake?

In doing so, Elena’s assertion that the earthquake eliminated all sense of stability and continuity in her life is not simply a psychological manifestation of a post traumatic state of mind, but, by extension, a reflection on the relationship between the earthquake and the fissures in the plot. If, as we mentioned before, the earthquake is often presented as evidence of Ferrante’s lack of subtlety, can we not say that it does to us as readers precisely what it does to Elena? Namely, that the earthquake alters our hermeneutics so that “a sort of suspicion of every form of reassurance [takes] over, a tendency to believe in every prediction of bad luck, an obsessive attention to signs of the brittleness of the world…” If not the earthquake itself, its position in the text allows for the intrusion of destabilizing forces that, though raw material for

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100 Falotico discusses the notions of the chasms or “plot holes” (*voragini*), and referring in particular to the unsolved mysteries of the novel, writes that “il lettore si trova dentro una poetica e un’idea di scrittura che lo chiama direttamente in causa a integrare il non detto, a trovare la spiegazione più convincente fra le ipotesi messe in campo e lasciate volutamente in sospeso, perché fra le parole si aprono voragini e a collegarle sono ponti interrotti” (“Elena Ferrante” 111) / “readers encounter a poetics and an idea of writing that calls out to them directly to integrate the unsaid, to find the most convincing explanation among the hypotheses laid out for them and left deliberately in suspension, because chasms open between words connected by incomplete bridges” (my translation). As I have mentioned elsewhere, I believe these instances of blurred agency work toward a destabilization of plot’s causality. I am wary of stating that Ferrante is calling upon readers to fill in the gaps; in fact, it might be that she is precisely critiquing our incessant need to fill in the gaps.

101 As the geological rupture carries with it an intrusion of the *frantumaglia*, the plot suffers for it. de Rogatis makes a somewhat similar argument: “La frantumaglia del tempo problematizza la progressione lineare della storia attraverso la tensione generata dalle forze compresenti nell’ipergenere” (Parole 1526) / “The frantumaglia of time problematizes the linear progression of the story through the tension generated by the forces simultaneously present in the hypergenre” (my translation). However, her point hinges on a generic distinction, which I will discuss in Chapter 4.

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the text, have no place within the boundaries of the plotted ground. A consequence of this rupture and irruption is that the scaffolding of the novel comes crumbling and its artificiality is laid bare. We as readers become even more suspicious, read too closely because too aware of the author’s hand, the text “brittle” in its status as pure manifestation of the author’s whim. The consequences of this process are arguably harmful to the novel. Ortega y Gasset, for example, discussed the need for the novel to conceal its artificial nature: “Porque la novela exige … que no se la perciba como tal novela, que no se vea el telón de boca ni las tablas del escenario. Balzac, leído hoy, nos despierta de nuestro ensueño novelesco a cada página, porque nos golpeamos contra su andamiaje de novelista” (“Ideas” 892) / “For a novel … must, while it is read, not be conceived as a novel; the reader must not be conscious of curtain and stage-lights. Reading Balzac, for example, we are on every page thrown out of the dream-world of the novel because we have bumped into the novelistic scaffolding” (“Notes” 304).

Almost a century later, we know that such novelistic prescriptions are misguided, or, at best, idiosyncratic. We’ve gone through too many crises of representation to ingenuously demand that a novel represent reality faithfully (even if what Ortega y Gasset demands is not the faithful representation of reality itself, but that the novel maintain its central conceit). Far from being in a position to impose rules on the genre of the novel, it is important to ask exactly what happens when, as Ortega y Gasset points out, we bump “into the novelistic scaffolding.” Interestingly, his reaction to Balzac is somewhat echoed by Genette, who identified a “démon explicatif” behind the French writer’s constant need to impose on readers some form of commentary on his characters’ actions, or to advance a theory of his own practice. Genette also referred to this phenomenon as “l’invasion du récit par le discours” (13). Things become more complicated in L’amica geniale, for the authorial figure itself is dramatized, and the bulk of the
novel is the production of one of the characters, so that bumping into the scaffolding takes us back not only to Ferrante, but to Elena.102

We’ve spoken before of this laying bare of the text’s artificiality, as well as of its possible relation to sadism. It seems to me, nevertheless, that something different is at stake here, something that does not hide the more sinister intention of punishing the other, but rather a rapprochement to the forces that threaten to undo the workings of plot. If the earthquake marks the entire novel’s strongest episode of smarginatura, and if it is, furthermore, the only one in which Elena is present, can we reformulate Genette’s “invasion du récit” as done not by the discours, but by the histoire?103 We mentioned before that the text’s positionality is internal but that its most destabilizing moments highlight its outward look. In this scene, the position Elena occupies is very much within the plot, and yet, as a first-hand witness to Lila’s episode of smarginatura, she is a spectator looking over (affacciandosi) onto the space that harbors “life in its pure state.” This state is marked by a lack of form—is, as we said before, antithetical to plot, or, in the Aristotelian sense, pure matter as opposed to actuated form. “La vita senza vedere e senza dire,” says Lila at the beach, “senza dire e senza ascoltare, la vita senza una veste, senza un contenitore, è sformata” (SNC 221-22) / “Life without seeing and without speaking, without speaking and listening, life without a covering, without a container, is shapeless” (SNN 222).104

102 The novel’s preoccupation with boundaries is not only conveyed through its imagery of disintegration and its investment in the different valences of smarginatura, but also in the confusion created by similar names. This tendency is present 1) at all narrative levels and 2) in most of Ferrante’s novels. So, for instance, there is Elena Ferrante and Elena Greco; Lina and Lila, Gennaro and Gennaro, Elisa and Elsa. In L’amica geniale the duplication seems also to be part of a commentary on a vizio organico. A novel like La figlia oscura dramatizes the critique on notions of individual identity by creating an even more disconcerting confusion of names: Nina, Ninù, Ninè, Nani, Elena, Lenù.

103 I use Genette’s term here for pure convenience and to stay in tune with this paragraph. But by histoire I also mean fabula and frantumaglia.

104 The notion of form and the informe (Shapeless) is crucial to Ferrante’s discussion of the southern Mother. In this sense, too, it is the lack of a story and the fact that a story cannot be inscribed on the female body that constitutes the Shapeless, hence the importance of garments, for they unify the metaphor of the thread of the story in order to create a second body.
Form (plot) becomes a receptacle (armature) capable of containing this shapelessness, which necessarily raises the question whether the shapeless can truly be represented or only tangentially addressed, indirectly referenced as *fabula* through *sjužet*. Perhaps *La figlia oscura* comes closest to a direct representation of the shapeless; still, the novel remains deeply unsettling and explicitly incomplete.\(^{105}\) I do not in any way mean this negatively, but rather as a simple observation that *L’amicgeniale*, in invoking the Bildungsroman, must exhibit at least a semblance of completeness and a strong reliance on plot in a way that *La figlia oscura*, a much more “Modernist,” text does not. Mazzanti, in fact, brings up a similar point by describing the novel as “un romanzo-sintomo in cui i temi ... della quadrologia restano aggrovigliati in un nodo appunto ‘oscu’ ... un racconto analitico concentrato e onirico, più che in un romanzo di ampio respiro” (90) / “a cautionary novel in which the themes ... of the tetralogy remain tangled in an obscure knot ... a condensed and oneiric analytical story, more than a novel of ample breadth” (my translation).

Having gained an idea of the destabilizing nature of *smarginatura*, it is understandable that Elena herself does not experience it. More than that, it is necessary that she does not experience it, at least not to this degree,\(^{106}\) so that her narrative positionality can become the parapet over which she leans to look at the *frantumaglia*. The glimpse that we get of the

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\(^{105}\) Ferrante, in fact, writes about *La figlia oscura*: “Li ho preteso da me più di quanto probabilmente potessi dare: una storia avvincente che si scrive senza che chi la scrive, per la natura stessa di ciò che racconta, possa comprenderne il senso, anci perché, se succedesse, ne potrebbe morire” (258) / “There I demanded of myself more than I could easily give: a story that was compelling but, at the same time, whose meaning the writer, by the very nature of what she is narrating, is unable to understand; because, if she did, she might die of it” (267). Although I agree with Ferrante that *La figlia oscura* is the riskiest of her novels because it places a senseless act in its center, I think she is undermining the more subtle destabilizing strains of *L’amicgeniale*. I find this novel to be an even more successful critique of plot precisely because it adopts it so unabashedly, whereas *La figlia oscura* has the density and brevity of a *racconto*.

\(^{106}\) Is the reason that the narration does not spend too much time on Elena’s episode of *smarginatura* after losing her doll is that it would constitute a considerable threat to its structure?
frantumaglia during the earthquake is twice-removed, for not only is it subjected to Elena’s ordering power but also filtered through her language.¹⁰⁷ Seen from the outside, Lila is a jumble of incoherencies to her friend. When Lila begins to explain the way in which she perceives the world, Elena uses one of the formulations that continues to reappear in the novel: “e qui riassumo a parole mie di adesso” (SBP 162) / “here I summarize in my own words, of the present” (SLC 176). We find that we are, instead, thrice-removed from the episode: Elena has added to the linguistic filter the chronological one. “In my own words, of the present” should be implicit—is that not the foundation of most narrative’s retrospective glance?—yet time and again we find this formulation or a variation of it in the novel.¹⁰⁸ Let’s take closer look at the passage, since it might give us a better idea of what is lost in the process of narration:

Mormorò che per lei era così da sempre, una cosa si smarginava e pioveva su un’altra, era tutto uno sciogliersi di materie eterogenee, un confondersi e rimescolarsi. Esclamò che aveva dovuto sempre faticare per convincersi che la vita aveva margini robusti, perché sapeva fin da piccola che non era così – non era assolutamente così –, e perciò della loro

¹⁰⁷ The linguistic issue is absolutely central to L’amica geniale, as is the narrative device of filtering dialect. Most critics remark on the fact that even though dialect is ubiquitous in Elena’s world, it is never allowed in the narration (with the exception of isolated words or short phrases, usually of negative connotation). In other words, dialect is constantly reported, almost never quoted, which leads Andrea Villarini to state that Ferrante’s brand of realism is “un realismo allusivo che sceglie di non mostrarcì per intero la realtà, senza però perdere nulla della sua capacità di ricostruire un ambiente o un dialogo” (195) / “an allusive realism that chooses not to show us reality in its entirety, without, however, losing any of its capacity to reconstruct a milieu or a dialogue” (my translation). Unfortunately, we cannot fully delve into the linguistic issue; still, as pertains our discussion of frantumaglia, Elena’s reticence and her refusal to allow dialect into her narration can be understood as a means to keep the frantumaglia at bay. Cavanaugh writes that “because of dialects’ long-standing role as the languages of everyday life, they are understood to describe life and experience more vividly and immediately” (59); in this case, however, the reality of dialect is not just the reality of the everyday, but the reality of the frantumaglia, of life in its pure state.

¹⁰⁸ Alternately, there are moments when Elena describes a situation in her own words but emphasizes that a particular word was used. For instance, when Lila discusses life in its pure state, Elena writes: “Non ricorse proprio a queste parole, ma di sicuro usò sformata e lo fece con un moto di repulsione” (SNC 222) / “She didn’t use exactly those words, but certainly she said ‘shapeless’ and she said it with a gesture of revulsion” (SNN 222).
resistenza a urti e spintoni non riusciva a fidarsi. Contrariamente a come aveva fatto fino a poco prima, prese a scandire frasi sovreccitate, abbondanti, ora impastandole con un lessico dialettale, ora attingendo alle mille letture fatte da ragazzina. Borbottò che non doveva mai distrarsi, se si distraeva le cose vere, che con le loro contorsioni violente, dolorose, la terrorizzavano, prendevano il sopravvento su quelle finte che con la loro compostezza fisica e morale la calmavano, e lei sprofondava in una realtà pasticciata, collacea, senza riuscire più a dare contorni nitidi alle sensazioni. Un’emozione tattile si scioglieva in visiva, una visiva si scioglieva in olfattiva, ah che cos’è il mondo, Lenù, l’abbiamo visto adesso, niente niente niente di cui si possa dire definitivamente: è così. Per cui se lei non stava attenta, se non badava ai margini, tutto se ne andava via in grumi sanguigni di mestruo, in polipi sarcomatosi, in pezzi di fibra giallastra. (SBP 162)

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. Contrary to what she had been doing, she began to utter a profusion of overexcited sentences, sometimes kneading in the vocabulary of the dialect, sometimes drawing on the vast reading she had done as a girl. She muttered that she mustn’t ever be distracted: 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. A tactile
emotion would melt into a visual one, a visual one would melt into an olfactory one, ah, what is the real world, Lenù, nothing, nothing, nothing about which one can say conclusively: it’s like that. And so if she didn’t stay alert, if she didn’t pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber. *(SLC 175-76)*

This moment (not only this passage, but the entire episode) is perhaps the most encompassing description of *smarginatura* that the novel offers. Strikingly, Lila’s direct account remains inaccessible, a reason for which is that the type of reality that’s being described precedes language, or rather is antithetical to it. Indeed, Lila arguably could not be the narrator of *L’amica geniale* because of her painful closeness to the senselessness of things. In her reference to the solution of heterogeneous materials we hear echoes of Ferrante’s own description of *frantumaglia* as “percepire con dolorosissima angoscia da quale folla di eterogenei leviamo, vivendo, la nostra voce e in quale folla di eterogenei essa è destinata a perdersi” (*La frantumaglia* 95) / “to perceive with excruciating anguish the heterogeneous crowd from which we, living, raise our voice, and the heterogeneous crowd into which it is fated to vanish” (100).

One could argue that the description of Lila’s state quoted above captures in words the process which we have just said escapes language. The passage is in fact misleading. We are told that Lila’s overexcited phrases are *kneaded* with the vocabulary of dialect. This process of kneading (*impastare*) interests me greatly, as it stands for the kind of work that language itself does—that is, force into a homogeneous mixture all things that are *not* homogeneous. What we witness here is not exactly Lila’s episode of *smarginatura*, but the effects of it. The Lila who is in the midst of experiencing *smarginatura* is the Lila that precedes this moment—the Lila who utters a rabid cry and vomits in the courtyard. The same Lila that the narration ignores as it
focuses on the description of the earthquake, and, when its focus turns to her again, can only emit cries and death rattles, manifesting the fraught relationship between language and pain. “Physical pain,” Elaine Scarry writes, “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Lila’s might not strictly constitute a form of physical pain, but it still acts as an “unmaking of the world,” which Ferrante relates to the *frantumaglia*: “se dovessi dire cos’è il dolore per i miei due personaggi, direi solo: è affacciarsi sulla frantumaglia” (*La frantumaglia* 96) / “if I had to say what suffering is for my two characters, I would say only: it’s looking onto the frantumaglia” (101).109 If the *frantumaglia* entails an unmaking of the world, can we reformulate this unmaking as a dissolution of the margins that in keeping things together also grants them a semblance of identity?

Moreover, if *smarginatura* actively destroys language, what we witness in the Lila who can only emit sounds is the regression to “a state anterior to language.” Her senseless phrases and obsessive repetition of “adjectives and nouns that were completely incongruous with the situation” (*SLC* 174) are a direct manifestation of the grammar of the *frantumaglia*, or, rather, the *frantumaglia*’s devastating effect on grammar and the linguistic apparatus that grants signification and keeps semantic networks in place. Along with this deconfiguration of grammatical and semantic structures comes a deconfiguration of spatial coordinates, which explains why, time and again, Lila describes losing all sense of space during episodes of *smarginatura*.110 This is also why the earthquake, as nature’s ultimate and most powerful force

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109 Goldstein translates “dolore” as “suffering” instead of the more literal “pain.” Of course, this is a perfectly acceptable choice, though it might put stress on the emotional quality of the experience at the expense of describing its raw, physical aspects, which are fundamental to *frantumaglia*.

110 Elena, too, writes about how the experience of losing her doll altered her sense of space: “Quando ritornai per le strade e a scuola, sentii che anche lo spazio era cambiato” (*AG* 53) / “When I returned to the streets and to school, I felt that the space, too, had changed” (*MBF* 57).
of spatial deconfiguration, can become the central figure of *smarginatura*—the margins of the earth literally giving way. Its intensity a displacement of catastrophic proportions of the *smarginatura* that the text simply cannot represent in a direct manner. This cannot be stressed enough—the experience, by its very definition, cannot be described by language; it is antithetical to plot and a threat to it insofar as it “actively destroys language.”

It is telling that Elena herself marks the moment when Lila, little by little, begins to reconfigure the semantic and spatial coordinates around her. “Contrariamente a come aveva fatto fino a poco prima” / “Contrary to what she had been doing” are the words that preface the description. The process of reconfiguration begins with a linguistic reconstruction, so that by “kneading” overexcited phrases with the vocabulary of her dialect and (interesting detail) drawing on the readings of her childhood, Lila is quite literally taking raw material and pressing, folding, and stretching it in order to turn it into palatable language, in order to force Arendt’s “intolerable events” into the prison of language. If we conceive of language in this fashion, can we say that all linguistic creation is a form of fiction? Not necessarily in the post-structuralist or Lacanian sense, but rather insofar as it takes “real” but unbearable matter, life in its pure form, and renders it into language, all in a palliative process meant to conceal the senselessness of things. Linguistic creation, in this sense, is also a form of beautification, as suggested by Lila’s cryptic response to Elena’s comment that “luckily” they were both together during the earthquake: “‘meno male’ è uno sfiato di profumo che esce quando premi la pompetta” (SBP 166) / “‘Luckily’ is a breath of perfume that comes out when you press the pump” (SLC 180). In

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111 If *smarginatura* escapes language, it is because it allows for the intrusion of the *frantumaglia*, which, as we have stated, is as a pre-linguistic space where signification has yet to occur. Because glimpsed at by the self who has already entered the symbolic order (or, in Lukácsian terms, by the self who still thinks in terms of totality), this intrusion is experienced as horror, in the case of the Kristevan abject, or in Ferrante’s, as the undefinable feeling that borrows aspects of sadness, disgust, and anger. Hence Lila’s vomiting and her rabid cries.
other words, by simply stating that something “luckily” was the case, one is already linguistically imbuing events with direction and intention, a process framed by Lila as a sort of beautification, strengthening the relation we have been trying to advance between art and artifice.

That Lila draws on her childhood readings during the earthquake seems to be both an effect of the chronological dissolution of boundaries that she is experiences, as well as a return to the moment when she was just being inoculated by language. This is, too, one of the effects of frantumaglia, that “sticky, jumbled reality [that] would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines.” Her admission, on the other hand, about being constantly attentive so that things around her won’t lose their margins can be related to the notion of sorveglianza, or surveillance, crucial to Ferrante’s understanding of what being a modern, resourceful woman means:

la veglia, l’essere vigile, ma senza appellarsi allo sguardo, bensì al gusto di sentirsi in vita. I maschi hanno trasformato il sorvegliare in attività di sentinella, di secondino, di spia. La sorveglianza invece, se bene intesa, è piuttosto una disposizione affettiva di tutto il corpo, un suo distendersi e germogliare sopra e intorno. (La frantumaglia 98)

Akin to the notion of mindfulness, sorveglianza entails an awareness of one’s body and surroundings; it is wakefulness and implies the ability to watch over oneself.

Despite her best efforts, though, Lila’s attentiveness does not prevent her from experiencing smarginatura. Elena admits that she never could have undergone a crisis of that kind: “la mia autodisciplina era stabile, il mondo mi restava intorno con naturalezza anche nei
momenti più terribili” (SBP 160) / “my self-discipline was stable, the world existed around me, in a natural way, even in the most terrible moments” (SLC 174). While this self-discipline is a quality shared by all of Ferrante’s narrators, the novels plot precisely its sometimes slow, sometimes quick crumbling. Olga is perhaps the most obvious example, as the composed woman we meet at the very beginning of the novel quickly descends into the downward spiral of grief, a process that undoes her entire conception of the world. In Elena, this vulnerability is to a certain extent absent. In that sense, she stands out from the rest of Ferrante’s protagonists, much in the way that L’amica geniale stands out from among Ferrante’s other novels for its intricate plot. Can we, then, posit a correlation between these two facts? Have we arrived at a mathematical understanding of emplotment, whereby the level of intricacy of plot is directly proportional to the strength of the forces that threaten to undo the workings of plot, so that, in L’amica geniale, the experience of smarginatura has to be displaced onto the other? This is intimately related to one of the novel’s main concerns: friendship. If we have cursorily referred to L’amica geniale as a Bildungsgroman, we have nevertheless failed to notice its peculiarity as a double Bildungsroman, or as one that is constantly destabilized by the presence of two protagonists. These will be the considerations of Chapter 4, in which we will explore Lila’s and Elena’s structural roles in the novel, as well as the ways in which the Quartet treats the issue of identity and the life story of the self. Cavarero details this process; her conception of the expositive and relational character of identity is essential to our understanding of the novel and will eventually guide our analysis.

As for this chapter, I hope to have provided a clear idea of how L’amica geniale relies on plot as a palliative against the intolerable and inapprehensible nature of life in its pure form, as well as how this reliance, almost paradoxically, lays emphasis on that very nature which it seeks
to keep at bay. Although we will have the opportunity to expand on it later, I would like to briefly address Peter Brook’s conception of plot as an arabesque or squiggle suggestive of the “arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end” (104). It seems to me that Brooks might be conflating different aspects or stages of plot when he speaks of the gratuity of narrative and writes, regarding the way in which plot comes to life, of “deviance, detour, an intention that is irritation [as] characteristics of the narratable, of ‘life’ as it is the material of narrative, of fabula become sjužet” (104). The thermodynamic model and our metabolic addition to it conform, to a certain degree, to this conception of plot, since they understand textual energy to be any form of tension or conflict that arises from an event. But is this another way of saying that every story comes about because something happened which was not supposed to happen? And can we safely assume that the Brooksian model works under the assumption that life in its pre-narrative state is not worth telling, until some sort of deviation—and here comes the squiggle figure—occurs?

More importantly, can this conform to the Ferrantean corpus and the role that plot plays in it as we have attempted to elucidate it in these pages? If we were to accept Brooks’s concept of plot’s inherent deviance, what I just suggested would inevitably ensue, namely, that plot arises when something happens that was not supposed to happen; but are we not then committing a fallacy by assuming that there is some form of intention in the pre-narrative life—that things are supposed to happen a certain way before they are told? Plot-as-deviance suggests that the pre-narrated was already in a state of order and that the plotted narrative begins through disruption. But how can plot be a disruption of an ordered state if, as Brooks and we have asserted, the threat of entropy always lurks beneath the text? It seems to me that a close look at the Quartet
suggests an alternative conception of the life before and during plot. In *L’amica geniale* and Ferrante’s other novels, the pre-narrative state is not unworthy of being told, as Brooks suggests, but rather *impossible* of being told, by its nature hostile to language, only available to us from a distance much as Lila is only available to us through Elena. In this conception of an entropic *fabula-as-frantumaglia*, plot does not begin as disruption, but rather as organization, is in itself anabolic, though it ostensibly also always needs a share of catabolism. Nothing is *supposed to be* before plot, because any inkling of intention already belongs to plot. We can now also begin to see how utterly inapprehensible life is without plot.

I mean this in the strictest sense of the term. Plot can and often is critiqued and challenged, yet the site of this critique is always internal; it takes place from within the plot and is therefore subsumed under it. Brooks’s figure of the arabesque, after all, comes from Sterne, whose attitudes toward plot are well known. The figure of the arabesque in *Tristram Shandy* is fundamental (as it is in the Quartet), but I would hesitate to call it the novel’s plot. Have we arrived at a new concept? Is this anti-plot? How does a novel like *Tristram Shandy*, in its utter rejection of plot, compare to *L’amica geniale*, which embraces an extremely intricate plot yet constantly destabilizes it. Rather than disruption, we can speak of *irruption*—of the *irruption* of destabilizing forces into the plotted ground, the margins of which have dissolved.112 Yet how do we reconcile our figure of convergence, the *groviglio/garbuglio*tangle with Brooks’s arabesque? While Brook’s identifies the arabesque as the geometry of plot, I instead locate it in the pre-

112 Another way to think about this issue is through the concept of porosity. Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis attributed to Naples the quality of porosity: “Porosity is the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere” (171). This is a concept that pervades Ferrante’s novels (and that we can relate to the liquefaction we’ve been discussing). These novels emphasize the porosity—alternately, penetrability—of bodies and its relationship to violence. This porosity is at the basis of Delia’s fear of regression; it is also the reason why she cannot keep dialect at bay, or rather, why dialect keeps *irrupting* into the narration even if it is not quoted.
plotted state. In the *fabula-as-frantumaglia*, which, as we have already noted, Ferrante herself conceptualizes as a *garbuglio*.

By this I do not mean that plot has to be a straight line, but linear. Linear in the sense of coherent, “of causation, evolution, time, etc.: progressing in a single direction by regular steps or stages, sequential” (“linear”), except that by virtue of being plot, this sequential cannot but take the guise of the *consequential*. This will perhaps come across as a much too orthodox conceptualization of plot. It is not my intention, nevertheless, to prescribe; I am not suggesting that plots should present events consequentially and coherently, but rather that the human-all-too-human impulse to plot is rooted in exactly this necessity to ascribe meaning to a meaningless reality by attributing it with a sense of consequence—that, in a way, plotting is in the eye of the beholder. Thankfully, this impulse and what results from it are human and thus imperfect, so that no matter what story we are reading, we can always find a fissure in the armature of plot. Some writers, like Ferrante, thematize this fissure and make it the subject of their narratives. Perhaps we can come back to the image of the train tracks. A train does not have to proceed in a straight line, but it always has a sense of direction. It must always proceed on its tracks. Perhaps plot is precisely this, and the fissures are the threat of derailment.

So plot, to us, is not a squiggle or an arabesque. To end this chapter, I would like to return to the image of the *garbuglio*. If the *garbuglio* is what literature is made out of, and if we think of this *garbuglio-as-fabula-as-frantumaglia* in terms of a skein, the way Ferrante and Gadda do, then we come to the following conclusion: That plotting is the unraveling of the skein, that a skein, by virtue of being tangled, has no beginning or end, so that if plot is firstly charged with finding a beginning, then one has to find the *end* of the thread. Once the narrative begins to be thread, then the *garbuglio* begins to cease being so. “Cercare il bandolo è utile, ma la
letteratura si fa col garbuglio” (323), writes Ferrante / “Seeking to unravel things is useful, but literature is made out of tangles” (333). And yet. Seeking to unravel things is in the very nature of plot. It entails the beginning of a process whereby something is woven, an image created—actuated—out of the potentiality of the tangled skein. We are not equipped to apprehend tangles. In the end, even if we seek to conceptualize the tangle, to prioritize it before plot, we are, in a way plotting it. Once again, Genette was right: “l'horreur du vide et la pression du sens sont telles que cette absence de signe devient vite signifiante” (20) / “the abhorrence of a vacuum and the pressure for meaning are such that this absence of signs quickly becomes significant” (252-54). We find that “a minimum” of plot is not only necessary for the mechanics of plot, as Ortega y Gasset suggests. It is necessary to live. And if there is such a thing as a “female” plot, we do not believe that it springs from an inherently feminine conception of the world. Such essentializing has no place in our study. Instead, if “female plots” tend to “lapse a trifle too liquidly,” perhaps it is because the ascriptions and prescriptions and descriptions that have been historically imposed on them have only paradoxically revealed their arbitrariness, and in the process, the ultimate meaninglessness of “life,” so that a further suspicion of plot has to permeate these texts, a residue of those encounters with life in its pure state, whether one conceptualizes it as the abject, the Real, frantumaglia, or an intolerable sequence of events. In this sense, a female plot is woven by they who have looked into the abyss and, having done so, will always carry its mark. We find that while we each string the pearls differently, strung they must be in the end, at least if a necklace must be made.
CHAPTER 3. A PERVERSION OF INGENUITY

“Love her, love her, love her! If she favors you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces,—and as it gets older and stronger it will tear deeper,—love her, love her, love her!”

Strung they must be, indeed, if a necklace must be made. But are we to buy into the neat distinction between male and female plots, between pearls strung tightly and pearls strung “a trifle too liquidly”? Can such essentializing find a place in our study? Ferrante’s novels seem to invalidate this clear division, L’amore molesto, I giorni dell’abbandono, and La figlia oscura leaning much more on the “liquid” side, L’amica geniale on the taut. And yet, while the Quartet is at once strung much too tightly, it simultaneously destabilizes our reading experience by making evident the string that binds the pearls, or, as Ortega y Gasset would have it, the novelistic scaffolding. At the same time, we have partly attributed the thalassic aspects of Ferrante’s earlier novels, as well as the Quartet’s plot fissures, to the gendered experience of their protagonists, so that we find that there might be, after all, something of the “female plot” in these novels, which our adherence to what Fraiman calls “another geometry of obstructed female development” seems to confirm. Perhaps the easiest way to elucidate these questions is by way of contradistinction, so that I have chosen to look in this chapter at L’amica geniale, the most prominent novel of female Bildung to be published in recent years, next to one of the most representative novels of the genre at large: Great Expectations.

The very few mentions I’ve encountered of Ferrante alongside Dickens cursorily refer to serialization, narrative breadth, or the use of melodrama. de Rogatis writes that, in the Quartet, “Ferrante adotta un modello di grande narrazione, che per un verso recupera la tradizione del feuilletton e del romanzo popolare dickensiano, e per l’altro riattiva … le forme narrative di
successo delle serie televisive” (“Elena Ferrante” 292) / “Ferrante adopts a model of great narrative that, on the one hand, recuparates the tradition of the feuilleton and the Dickensian popular novel, and, on the other, makes use … of the successful narrative forms of television series” (my translation). Unsurprisingly, a reviewer for The Economist called Ferrante “a 21st-century Dickens” for her “fusion of high and low art” (“Ties that Bind”). My interest in this chapter, however, lies not so much in what connects Ferrante to Dickens as in what connects L’amica geniale to Great Expectations, particularly in what both novels can tell us about the act of plotting, its potentials and dangers. My intent is not to focus on the popularity of both authors or in the mechanisms of serialization behind their works (although a study of these aspects would certainly be revelatory), but rather on the novels’ strong reliance on plot and its tendency, insofar as I understand the novels to be Bildungsromane, to unify the discrete incidents that make up a life and wrest meaning from their sequential placement. If in the following pages a profound engagement with L’amica geniale feels lacking or relegated to the footnotes, I hope at least that the digression into Dickensian territory will provide compensation enough for this absence not only by illuminating some of the points we have made in our two previous chapter but, more importantly, by providing the theoretical groundwork necessary to tackle the generic issues that Chapter 4 will discuss.

The decision to approach L’amica geniale through Great Expectations (or vice versa) might appear odd, especially when so many novels of female formation offer themselves to us from the nineteenth century onwards; the works of Austen or Eliot would undeniably be suitable companions for the tetralogy. If I have chosen Dickens, it is not only because of my deep personal admiration for Great Expectations, but primarily because I see the novel as an important blueprint for L’amica geniale in its status as one of the central Bildungsromane of the
nineteenth century. In fact, it has been my conviction since I first read the Quartet that much of the genetic material that makes up *Great Expectations* is inscribed in Elena and Lila’s story. While thematically very similar—both, superficially, stories of social ascent—the novels also share a deep preoccupation with the act of plotting, their structures erected through the protagonists’ will to imbue a life with meaning, and, as such, subjected to the protagonists’ whims and obsessions, their punitive and generous impulses, their recollective failings and reconstructions. In regards to this, I am interested in the following aspects of the novels:

1) A link we’ve indicated in previous chapters between *colpa* and plotting, as well as its implications for the process of textual (re)construction.

2) The pervasiveness of corruption—social and ethical on the thematic level, but, in a nod to Chapter 1, metabolic on the structural.

3) The destabilizing presence of an other. Elena’s relationship to Lila and Pip’s to Estella not only inform but are also fundamental to the plotting activity.

We have established how intricately wrought *L’amica geniale* is. *Great Expectations*, similarly, has long been admired for its brilliance of design, and has been praised as one of the most perfectly plotted novels in the English language. George Bernard Shaw called it “compactly

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113 Or woven, or untangled, or strung. We have hopefully made evident by now the wild proliferation of metaphors for textual construction (as well as the metaphorical root of the word *text*). I hope readers will find the generosity in them to forgive such a “surplus of signifiers,” as Kermode would have it. At times, we choose a particular metaphor so as to coincide with the critic we are discussing; at others, because it might better adjust to a particular point at hand.

114 I am fully aware that Pip does not write his story and that the act of plotting in *Great Expectations* is not as sophisticatedly dramatized as it is in *L’amica geniale*. Nor could it be the case, I think, Ferrante writing at a point when we have become much more aware and suspicious of plotting. This, however, does not cancel out the fact that Pip “tells,” thus orders, his story (within the more general conceits of the usual first-person narration) and, by virtue of that, saturates it with his own impulses.
perfect” (qtd. in Dickens 54-55), and, had Coleridge lived to read it, he might have added it to his list of the “most perfect plots ever planned.”

David Trotter, in an introduction to the novel, invokes Shaw’s words, adding that many of the virtues of *Great Expectations* flow precisely from this compactness: “Whatever the novel has to say about goodness, about guilt and desire, about the nature of capitalism … it says by the way it takes their stress, by its distribution of their weight” (qtd. in Dickens 57-58). Trotter’s sentiment is surely founded. *Great Expectations* is not only “closely packed” by Dickens’s own standards—much more so than, say, *Dombey and Son* or *Bleak House*—but also by more general literary standards. On the surface, the novel is the embodiment of that most clichéd of observations whereby an author “makes every word count.” Yet even more than to its style, this compactness seems to me pertinent to the novel’s structure, namely to how much it achieves in the number of pages it takes up—how much of what happens early on is revealed at a later point to be of a greater significance than we had attributed to it. In the world of *Great Expectations*, even the smallest of occurrences is pregnant with meaning. We come out of the novel with a patent sense of design and intention—or, in other words, of emplotment. Trotter’s assessment speaks to this symmetry, and to a large degree I think it remains incontestable. We, of course, take this “distribution” of the weight of the novel’s themes as a manifestation of the text’s

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115 “What a master of composition Fielding was! Upon my word, I think the OEdypus Tyrannus, the Alchemist, and Tom Jones the three most perfect plots ever planned. And how charming, how wholesome, Fielding always is! To take him up after Richardson, is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves, into an open lawn, on a breezy day in May” (339). I wrote before of the Sternian and the Fieldian strands in Ferrante, yet Richardson’s influence cannot be ignored, as is most evident in the novel’s psychological veins. And then, Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* is sure to be found in the Quartet. Which, in turn, reminds me of Ortega y Gasset’s assertion that “toda novela lleva dentro, como una íntima filigrana, el Quijote” (*Meditaciones* 398) / “every novel bears Quixote within it like an inner filigree” (*From Meditations* 292).

116 As one of the definitions of “compact” has it, according to *Merriam Webster*. Naturally, this brings to mind James’s “taut cable.”
metabolic functions and their adherence to the laws of thermodynamics, which would dictate that whatever energies the text releases in its initial stages will be progressively bound through repetition, and, by the end, discharged in an effort to achieve textual balance.

To the extent that it is so “compact,” the novel does seem to work, as it were, as a balanced, isolated system. Perhaps the only site of contention here regards its much-discussed ending. Brooks, for instance, finds a surplus of energy in the revised ending, which, “with its tentative promise of reunion between Pip and Estella, ‘unbinds’ energies that we thought had been thoroughly bound and indeed discharged from the text” (136). Before proceeding any further, allow me to preface the following analysis by stating my debt to Brooks’s study of *Great Expectations* in *Reading for the Plot*. His observations, in many ways, were the germ for my own interpretation of *L’amica geniale*. At the same time, I would like to make clear how much I disagree with his approach to the novel to the extent that he unequivocally employs his critical acumen to dissect the Magwitch plot at the cost of leaving the Estella plot untouched. Other than to either shove it to the side as a deceptively central plot or to support his argument that the revised ending of the novel is flawed, Brooks does not really consider the ramifications of Pip’s feelings for Estella. I will go into further detail as to why I think the revised ending (and, to me, *the* ending, given as that was Dickens’s ultimate choice) is perfectly suitable. I will also attempt to correct Brooks’s nonnegligible omission of the romantic plot in an effort to understand how it might inform the novel’s treatment of “goodness [and] guilt and desire,” as well as corruption and vice.

This chapter, moreover, will set out in strict defiance to Trotter’s assertion that “while we may want to explore [the novel’s] uncertainties and contradictions, and develop its contexts, we

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117 “If we acknowledge Pip’s experience of and with Magwitch to be the central energy of the text…” (137), writes Brooks, which I certainly do not.
should also, in the end, be prepared to let well alone” (qtd. in Dickens 58-59). Not that we a priori affirm some sort of structural imbalance or, even less so, the existence of plot lacunae. Rather, my aim is to subject the novel’s plot and its energetic transactions to close scrutiny in an effort to gauge any surplus of energy or, as we have previously discussed, any form of life post-plot. Here, we return to a passage by Brooks discussed in Chapter 1:

As at the start of the novel we had the impression of a life not yet subject to plot—a life in search of the sense of plot that would only gradually begin to precipitate around it—so at the end we have the impression of a life that has outlived plot, renounced plot, been cured of it: life that is left over. What follows the recognition of Magwitch is left over, and any renewal of expectation and plotting—such as a revived romance with Estella—would have to belong to another story. It is with the image of a life bereft of plot, of movement and desire, that the novel most appropriately leaves us. (138)

Here, Brooks outlines precisely what draws me to Great Expectations, namely, that, like L’amica geniale, it dramatizes the onset of plot in a life as well as its dissolution. By no means is it my intention to suggest that no other novel does this. Many, in fact, do—yet the contrast present in these two novels is particularly interesting and conducive to a critical investigation of the site of excess. Rather than treat the leftover as an authorial faux pas, this study will examine it and whatever it might have to say about the state of emplotment. Can we identify some metabolic disorder at the end of Great Expectations, as in the Quartet’s last storia? What is the result of the metabolic transactions involved in the novel’s two central plots of which Magwitch and Estella are representative?

Brooks structures his analysis mostly around two scenes: the “liminary primal scene” in the graveyard, which releases energy later bound through repetitions in the text and finally
discharged in the other scene he examines: the “recognition” of Magwitch. There is some ambiguity in his discussion: the recognition scene is most obviously the one in which Magwitch reveals himself to be Pip’s benefactor, yet Brooks at points seems to imply that by the recognition of Magwitch he intends the recapture of the convict, which occurs considerably later in the plot. This recognition-as-recapture is, I believe, what he refers to in the passage quoted above (“What follows the recognition of Magwitch is left over…”); otherwise, his assertion would be outright misguided, for so much happens after Magwitch’s strict recognition scene, so much, in fact, as to actually give way to the volume in the novel in which plotting of all kinds is most explicitly present. On the other hand, I am inclined to agree with the assertion that much of the plot, or half of it, does dissolve after the recapture of Magwitch. To better understand these transactions, I would like to structure my analysis around six pivotal scenes that belong to the novel’s two main plot lines and that perform analogous functions in each of them:

**Magwitch (Convict Plot)**

1. Originary Scene (Churchyard)
2. Recognition Scene (Pip’s Apartment)
3. Separation Scene (Prison)

**Estella (Romantic Plot)**

A. Originary Scene (Satis House; Courtyard)
B. Recognition Scene (Satis House; Dressing Room)
C. Separation Scene (Satis House; Ruins)

We’ve spoken of the novel’s compactness and are therefore aware that there are other scenes worth examining, among which Magwitch’s recapture, yet these six scenes interest me
because they represent turning points in the novel’s central plots and, more than that, present an analogous sense of progression. On the left column, the convict plot, the workings of which, for the first half of the novel, are subterranean. As critics have pointed out, the originary scene in the churchyard is relevant because, among other things, it situates Pip’s entrance into the linguistic realm in a space cohabited by the convict and the “taint” of crime that encompasses him. This taint suffuses the novel in ways that, though seemingly external to Pip, will covertly inaugurate and advance the plot of his expectations. If language and its acquisition play such an important role in Pip’s initial association with crime, it is because his own exegetic capabilities are one of the novel’s central concerns. In other words, we constantly find Pip reading—and, more importantly, misreading—the world around him, in ways that prompt us, in turn, to read and misread alongside him. Of course, we have already pointed out the relevance of the act of misreading in L’amica geniale, so that, already by now, some of the analogous workings of plot between the novels should be apparent. We will expand on these connections later, in an attempt to discern the ways in which both novels probe into forms of entanglement between crime, plotting, and obsession. We have arrived, too, at still another figure of entanglement. Like plot itself, the term entanglement has a wide range of semantic possibilities, so that if Chapter 2 investigated the figure of the tangle as raw material for the plot, Chapter 3 will take a look at how entanglement, with its legal overtones, signals to the network of inextricable connections binding these characters’ lives. In other words, how they are unwittingly and unwillingly involved, through the workings of plot, in the illegal, the illicit, or the perverse.

This is most evidently the case in the second and most important scene of the convict plot: the return of Magwitch and the disclosure of the truth behind Pip’s expectations. This recognition scene is a true anagnorisis in that it brings about an entire revision of the plot and
peripatetically sets in motion a new chain of events that, nonetheless, still form a part of the
convict plot, now made overt. This second half is quite literally an effort to eject (abject?) the
criminal after it has come to the surface. Although Pip’s initial desire to drive Magwitch out of
the country ostensibly morphs—part of his ethical and emotional Bildung—into a desire to get
him safely out of the country, the section remains a marked attempt to remove the criminal agent
and its ethical stain from the plot—a plot, paradoxically, to escape plot. That the river is the
locus of this attempted escape is not incidental, the captured Magwitch coming out of it fully
abluted, the unredeemable Compeyson drowned in it. It is inevitable that Magwitch should be
captured, at least if the novel wants to extricate itself from its criminal foundations; a fugitive
Magwitch would have once again placed the illicit at the very center of the novel, whereas a
captured Magwitch whose “portable property” has all gone to the Crown but whose ultimately
benevolent actions toward Pip have redeemed him works toward the project of exonerating Pip.

I have mentioned before the weight that exoneration tends to carry in Ferrante’s various
uses of plot; does the centrality of the concept in Pip’s story lead us to posit a more general
principle governing the relationship between the plotting activity and the (re)allocation of guilt?
It is with full awareness that I make the leap from exoneration to guilt, since, in both of these
novels, Dickens and Ferrante shed light on the fact that ethical reformation—a particularly
dominant trope in Western literature—oftentimes comes at a cost. Redemption, in other words,
does not occur in a vacuum, much as we would like to believe it. So that in ridding ourselves of
culpability, it becomes necessary to reallocate it. Once again, the first law of thermodynamics
creeps into our narrative world: Guilt can neither be created nor destroyed; it transforms from
one form to another. These transformations populate the pages of the Quartet: one example
among many, as discussed in Chapter 1, is the driving impulse behind Elena’s text to impose the
guilt of Tina’s disappearance on Lila; the epilogue, furthermore, leaves us with the unsettling suggestion that, in the end, Elena’s retributive act has been balanced by her friend through manipulation: “aveva raccontato una *sua* storia di riscatto, usando il *mio* corpo vivo e la *mia* esistenza” (SBP 451) / “she had told a story of redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence” (SLC 473). Once again, redemption always comes at a cost, often in a process entangled with the corrupt and involving those closest to us. After all, Elena and Lila use each other to achieve redemption, while Pip’s only way of relieving himself from his guilt is by getting rid of his benefactor. This is somewhat sinister, but in the text’s economy, it works. By reconfiguring Pip’s social *Bildung* into an ethical *Bildung*—a recalibration of formation into reformation—the novel might be said to extricate itself from its corrupt roots. We see in the third scene of the convict plot—the separation scene, or Magwitch’s death—a dissolution of the convict plot and an explicit plea for forgiveness (“O Lord, be merciful to him a sinner!”). But to what extent is Pip fully exonerated? To what extent is his benevolent retribution for Magwitch’s generosity specular to Jaggers’s infamous handwashing? In *L’amica geniale*, for instance, a metaphorical handwashing is out of the question. The very inception of the novel bears the sign of the corrupt (the descent into Don Achille’s basement) which makes the plot possible (the acquisition of *Little Women* with Don Achille’s money) and is woven into the text’s 1700 pages, most overtly through the Solara brothers, and yet more effectively conveyed in the moments in which the narration demonstrates how Lila and Elena are inextricably entangled with this network of corruption. The return of the dolls and the explicit reinvocation of Don Achille in the epilogue strongly suggest that the corrupt was never fully extricated from the plot. *Colpa* becomes the crux of the novel, murkyly entangled with the workings of plot.
A word, however: while *Great Expectations* remains a more sanitized novel in this respect, the stain of the criminal does extend to (is entangled with) the novel’s other main plot line—is even inscribed in its very genetic composition, as Magwitch is revealed to be the father of Estella. Which leads me to the romantic plot, on the right column. Much like the graveyard scene sets in motion—unbeknownst to Pip and us—the events necessary for the expectations to occur, Pip’s first visit to Satis House introduces him to, on the one hand, the world of Miss Havisham and the wealth that he will mistakenly read as the foundation of his expectations, and, on the other, to the figure of Estella, without whom the energies set in motion by the convict plot would have been wasted. Though there is no recognition scene in the romantic plot, at least not in the strict sense of the term, Pip’s return to Satis House after his encounter with Magwitch, in particular his ecstatic love declaration to Estella upon finding out of her engagement with Bentley Drummle, does exhibit the kind of functionality that we could attribute to a recognition scene. It externalizes Pip’s epistemic position in the novel, a veritable *ars poetica* in the guise of conventional romantic speech. As I will attempt to explain in Chapter 4, this scene attributes to Estella a structural role in *Great Expectations* comparable to that of Lila in *L’amica geniale*. Lastly, there is the separation scene which closes the novel. Whether it does manage to do away with the energies released by Pip’s obsession or whether it reactivates them by a “promise of reunion,” we will try to elucidate later on.

At this point, I would like to clarify why I take so much issue with Brooks’s prioritization of the convict plot. We could say that the romantic plot in *Great Expectations* is cleft. One side of it is not romantic, though it is subtended by its own romantic subplot; it is represented by Miss Havisham and all the possibilities she signifies as apparent donor. To the extent that Pip misreads Miss Havisham’s intentions, this line of plot is indeed a sort of cover up for the “truer” convict
plot, establishing Magwitch, and not Miss Havisham, as author of his expectations (though not, as we will see, of his desires). In this sense, and within Brooks’s more psychoanalytic framework, the convict plot that comes to the surface is the “real” one. The other side of the romantic plot, what I would argue is the central vein of this line of plot, is embodied in Estella. In fact, Estella is the glue that binds all the plots together, for if Pip wants Miss Havisham to make a gentleman of him, it is because he wants to be with Estella, and she, naturally, will always lead back to Magwitch.\(^{118}\) Pip’s feelings for her provide the thrust that keeps the plot in motion for most of the novel. Perhaps my point would be better gotten across through a futile speculative exercise. Had Pip never gone to Miss Havisham’s house, he still would have received great expectations. In that case, would he have left the comfort and the promise of a contented future at the forge? What would have been the source of his ambition if not Estella? Such a scenario makes clear the need for an impulse that goes beyond the purely mercenary. This is meant not to diminish the importance of Magwitch, but rather to point out the entanglement of both plot lines. We see this entanglement in the way in which the scenes presented in the graphic above are interwoven, so that, if taken in isolation, the plot lines proceed thus: 1, 2, 3 / A, B, C. And yet, in the order of the sjužet, they proceed 1A, 2B, 3C. This braided figure of emplotment suggests the connection between the workings of the convict plot and the structural importance of Estella as the text’s main figure of ambition and desire.

Because desire, passionate and ambitious, is the main force behind *Great Expectations*, I would like to proceed with my analysis by looking at the “recognition” scene of the romantic plot. As a caveat, I want to acknowledge my decision, in Chapter 1, to employ the term *impulse* over *desire*, partly out of a wish not to venture too deeply into psychoanalytic territory; in this

\(^{118}\) As we will discuss, Pip’s feelings for Estella extend beyond the conventionally romantic. Much like the Elena-Lila relationship, Pip and Estella’s is full of contradictory and destructive impulses.
scenario, we can speak of Pip’s impulses too. If desire seems a more appropriate a term here, it is for the sole fact that Pip’s feelings for Estella and his ambition take the form of desire naked and avowed. Whereas Elena’s impulses—say, the impulse to punish Lila—work more covertly and sometimes even in spite of her, Pip’s heart is, to use a trite expression, worn on his sleeve. Doubtless, desire is never that simple, and our goal here is to identify some of its furtive operations, but my point—and perhaps it is a strictly stylistic one—is that the force behind Pip’s action, more than an impulse, is desire worn as guiding light and principle, desire that obliterates.

Obliterating is perhaps a more adequate description of Pip’s desire than would appear on the surface. From “ob ‘against’… + littera (also litera) ‘letter, script’,” the word obliterate is “abstracted from [the] phrase literas scribere ‘write across letters, strike out letters’” (“obliterate”). Pip’s desire obliterates because it writes across the other texts that surround him and prompts him to misread the plot of his own expectations. If he writes across Miss Havisham’s intentions—writes, too, across the textual repetitions and returns of the convict plot—it is because he desires Estella enough to misread and enough to want to become a gentleman. We could say that Elena is blind to her desire (her impulse to punish), while Pip is blinded by his desire for Estella (and is blind to the texts around him). The recognition scene is illustrative of the functionality of desire in Pip’s exegetic practices. It comes when, devastated by the news of his expectations, he shows up at Satis House, partly to reproach and partly to wrest an explanation out of Miss Havisham. There, he finds Estella, who reveals that she will marry Bentley Drummle, prompting Pip to break into the following “rhapsody”:

“Out of my thoughts! You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read since I first came here, the rough common boy whose poor heart you wounded even then. You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since,—
on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the wind, in the woods, in the sea, in the streets. You have been the embodiment of every graceful fancy that my mind has ever become acquainted with. The stones of which the strongest London buildings are made are not more real, or more impossible to be displaced by your hands, than your presence and influence have been to me, there and everywhere, and will be. Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil. But, in this separation, I associate you only with the good; and I will faithfully hold you to that always, for you must have done me far more good than harm, let me feel now what sharp distress I may. O God bless you, God forgive you!” (6985-6992)

I described this scene before as a “veritable ars poetica in the guise of conventional romantic speech”; however, a closer grammatical look at Pip’s language might reveal something slightly unconventional about the way in which he expresses his feelings for Estella. Pip’s rhapsody does not strictly conform to the well-established literary tradition whereby the beloved is compared to beautiful objects, either through simile (“Her goodly eyes like sapphires shining bright”) or through more direct metaphoric substitution (“You are the bread and the knife / The crystal goblet and the wine”), of which the blason is a particularly famous example. Instead, Pip’s language vis-à-vis Estella—though not relegated to this instance, it is best exemplified by it—is more often than not expressed in the prepositional form. While the passage begins with a sort of metaphorical association, Pip does not use it to compare Estella to an object or to perspectivize his love for her, but rather to introduce the prepositional quality of her power over
Thus, “you are part of my existence,” where part acts as nominative clause, in the end speaks of influence, of a sort of positionality or even a metonymic relation in which, a part of Pip’s existence, Estella becomes simultaneously representative of it, everything subsumed under her influence. What follows is a catalogue of prepositional phrases: “You have been in every line I have ever read since I first came here”; “in every prospect …,—on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light.”

Note, firstly, that the opening prepositional clause reenters us into textual territory. Though Pip is in all probability referring to the actual literature that he has read, what is at stake in his feelings for Estella is, as we have stated, his way of reading, misreading, and failing to read all kinds of texts around him. This includes, of course, “the uncanny text of Estella’s visage” (131), as Brooks astutely points out. While this scene occurs before Pip sees Estella’s parentage inscribed in her body, it makes explicit the ways in which he sees her in everything around him, in a sort of anagramic contrivance. While the recognition scene of the convict plot brings to light Pip’s biggest reading mistake and lays bare the object of his blindness, the recognition scene of the romantic plot brings to light the reason for Pip’s mistake; it lays bare the mechanics of his blindness. The intensity of his feelings for Estella somewhat paradoxically blinds him to her very face (and thus to the truth of her parentage), so that Estella becomes cleft, concrete person on the one hand, a mediating force on the other, illuminating Pip’s exegetic

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119 Actually, Pip begins his rhapsody by echoing Estella’s words. “Out of my thoughts!” is his retort to her “You will get me out of your thoughts in a week.” Is there an echo here of Biddy’s own echoing of Pip’s words after Mrs. Joe’s funeral?
120 Strictly speaking, simile would also constitute a form of adpositional or prepositional relation, yet in that case it would most likely act adjectivally, whereas the sort of prepositional construction I am looking at acts, as it were, adverbially.
121 For reasons of space, I will not go into a detailed exploration of the Magwitch recognition scene, though it is certainly part of my conception of the novel’s architecture. For a more thorough analysis of it, see Brooks’s chapter on the novel in Reading for the Plot. I fully agree with his reading of his scene; once again, it is his “blindness” to Estella’s plot that I take issue with.
practices. We find that reading itself is thematized throughout the novel, as critics have noted in
length. My particular interest here lies in the way in which reading is present not just literally but
also through the act of seeing, as in the instance of “reading” Estella’s face. Not incidentally, Pip
describes his process of learning to read “in a purblind groping way” (1202); similarly, it is the
act of seeing, of observing, that allows Pip to identify in Estella’s hands the hands of her mother;
just as Magwitch’s return initiates in the darkness of Pip’s staircase and is fully accomplished in
the light of Pip’s lamp.122

Seeing is in fact the primary act of epistemic construction. “My first most vivid and broad
impression of the identity of things,” Pip writes, “seems to me to have been gained on a
memorable raw afternoon towards evening” (464). This originary scene of the convict plot is
firstly marked by Pip’s literal reading of the names on his parent’s tombstones, executed through
his attempts to interpret the letters by seeing them; his interpretive skills are not yet in the realm
of the symbolic, but are instead at the stage of the purely visual. In fact, his journey from literal
interpretation to the symbolic is one of the text’s more interesting aspects. “Also Georgiana.
That’s my mother,” he says to Magwitch, in an act of literal reading more than comparable to
Elena and Lila’s reimagination of Don Achille’s borsa nera. It is no coincidence that both novels
have strikingly similar openings, in which the literal and the figural are subverted and which
establish the influence of the criminal at the very onset of the plotted existence. About this
literalness, it is important to note that, after he has been introduced to Magwitch and the world of
Satis House, at a time when he is trapped in the iterative existence of his apprenticeship to Joe,
Pip, on the Sunday evenings he would spend about the churchyard, compares “my own
perspective with the windy marsh view, and making out some likeness between them by thinking

122 This metaphorical valence of the act of seeing harks back to at least Oedipus, and in Great
Expectations it is present from the very beginning.
how flat and low both were, and how on both there came an unknown way and a dark mist and then the sea” (2358-2359). What we witness here is a Pip who has acquired the linguistic capacity for metaphoric construction; yet this knowledge has come at the price of loss, suggesting that if metaphor works by the invocation of an absent thing, Pip’s recourse to it must inevitably be accompanied by an invocation of the life that he desires but is absent. In Christian terms, this is a Pip after the fall.

I do not invoke the Christian fall gratuitously, but rather because an analogous fall is the other mark of the originary scene, and one that again places the act of seeing at its center. I am speaking of the “tremendous dip and roll” that Magwitch gives Pip. This dip and roll is the culmination of an act of tilting meant to terrorize the child. “He tilted me again,” Pip writes four times in the same paragraph, a repetition that highlights not only the frightening qualities of the act but, what interests me more, its destabilizing force. Much is made of movement and direction in this originary scene, as is the case in the analogous scene in which Lila and Elena’s ascend the stairs diagonally leading to Don Achille’s house. These originary scenes establish what Brooks calls a “communion” with the criminal that, unbeknownst to them, will follow the protagonists throughout their lives. Can we, thus, speak of Lila and Elena’s ascent as a form of unwitting assent? Assent, that is, to become entangled with the criminal? I borrow this play on words from Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who, in Writing Beyond the Ending, discusses the speaker of “Diving into the Wreck” as spending “much of the poem in descent to arrive at dissent” (132). This ascent is absent in Pip, yet the significance of directionality remains. Put quite simply, the Pip shaken by Magwitch is a Pip whose life is about to be shaken up. Put more subtly, the Pip tilted

123 Perhaps entering us into Lacanian territory.
124 If we accept the proposition that literature works metaphorically, is Pip’s overliteral reading a sign that he has yet to find a plot?
by Magwitch, the Pip, ultimately, overturned by Magwitch, is a Pip whose entire epistemic approach to the world is about to undergo utter disruption. Long before Faulkner’s Benjy tells us of the disappearance of the barn, Pip tells us that “the church came to itself” and that it “jumped over its own weather-cock” (509). Two things are particularly worth nothing here: first, as we have already hinted at, the destabilization signaled by this literal overturn is primarily visual,125 as Pip’s field of vision is turned 180 degrees; second, the young Pip transfers this destabilization to his surroundings, instead of fully attributing it to his subjective position: “[Magwitch] made [the church] go head over heels before me,” he writes. Is this pure literary style attributable to Dickens’s famed capacity for bringing inanimate objects to life? Why is it that the church comes to itself and not Pip?

The young Elena and Lila, too, constantly attribute to external reality qualities that are ultimately reflections of their own affective states. I am led, therefore, to conclude that this tendency is not idiosyncratic of Dickens, but rather reflective of a quality of childhood that he and Ferrante both convey. After all, the childish tendency to literalize and transfer is most marked at the moment in both novels where the protagonists are in search of a plot (or where a sense of plot is about to fall on them, depending on how we choose to see it). There is something, too, about the fact that as these scenes mark an entry into the plotted ground, they also mark an entry into the realm of language, suggesting that the protagonists’ inoculation into the symbolic realm is accompanied by an association with the criminal. After all, with the money that they receive from Don Achille, the girls buy Little Women, the novel responsible for their intellectual (and partly for their emotional) formation. That the loan shark becomes the patron of the two

125 Brooks is not alone in noting Dickens’s masterful literalization of metaphors (among which metaphors for growing up). We have also noted this tendency in Ferrante.
girls compounds to the impression that even the seemingly purest aspects of life are inexorably entangled with the corrupt; the situation is strikingly similar for Pip.

But more of that later. I’d like to return to the connection between seeing and reading. A scene during one of Pip’s many returns to Satis House best illustrates this connection. It comes at a point where Pip has yet to find out about his expectations. Upon seeing Miss Havisham’s thirst for revenge manifested in her behavior toward Estella, Pip reflects:

I saw in this that Estella was set to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on men, and that she was not to be given to me until she had gratified it for a term. I saw in this, a reason for her being beforehand assigned to me. Sending her out to attract and torment and do mischief, Miss Havisham sent her with the malicious assurance that she was beyond the reach of all admirers…. I saw in this that I, too, was tormented by a perversion of ingenuity, even while the prize was reserved for me…. In a word, I saw in this Miss Havisham as I had her then and there before my eyes, and always had had her before my eyes; and I saw in this, the distinct shadow of the darkened and unhealthy house in which her life was hidden from the sun. (5877-5884)

It is from a visual cue—by observing, on the one hand, Miss Havisham’s behavior toward Estella and, on the other, by observing Miss Havisham observing him—that Pip claims to see the truth of his situation, and from this second, metaphoric act of seeing, which is one and the same with the act of reading,126 Pip constructs an entire interpretive vision of the signs around him. The sense of addition and repetition conveyed by the anaphoric construction of the passage (“I saw in this…I saw in this…”) emphasizes Pip’s interpretive effort to turn (manipulate) the metonymic incidences around him into a metaphoric (and thus cohesive) confirmation of his wish to marry

126 “I saw it written, as it were, in the falls of the cobwebs from the centre-piece” (5888), comments Pip immediately afterwards.
Estella. The anaphoric construction, too, grammatically subsumes the reality of things to the primacy of his own vision, to his “I saw in this,” so that we encounter the inverse of the churchyard scene; we have arrived at an exposure of the subjectivity that the young Pip was not yet capable of, but that the older Pip, initiated into the world of crime and love—initiated into his plot—can now achieve through metaphor.

“I saw in everything,” continues Pip, “the construction that my mind had come to, repeated and thrown back to me” (5887), revealing a curious awareness of his role as interpreter. For Pip, like Elena, is doubtless perspicacious. His diagnosis of Satis House is exact and profound, his awareness of the danger of Miss Havisham’s revengeful obsession lucid. The only sign he fails to read, or rather, the only desire that renders his entire reading fallacious is the desire that “the prize was reserved for me.” We come here to an important point in our study, one in which I would like to connect Great Expectations to L’amica geniale, namely, that Pip’s observational skills, like Elena’s, are outstanding and allow him to read and interpret the world around him, yet are ultimately impaired by desire. What the novel superficially presents as an exegetic exercise, and a deductive one at that, is in truth a counterfeit—insofar as artistic—effort to arrive at an end.\(^{127}\) Certainly, Pip’s writing of his own story is not dramatized the way Elena’s is, so that we cannot strictly speak of his writing practices, yet we can doubtlessly speak of his reading practices and the ways in which these are subordinated to his own desire. We return to our Genettean precept, which highlights in fiction (and here I speak also of the fictions that Pip creates for himself) “ce qu’elle a de concerté.” So that while “the prize was reserved for me” is

\(^{127}\) The manifestation of this artifice differs in each novel. In L’amica geniale, it is present in the way Elena plots and writes her friendship with Lila. In Great Expectations, it is present in the way Pip reads his plot. Dickens’s novel gives us a protagonist who is subject to plot; Ferrante gives us one who plots.
presented throughout the novel as a conclusion, it is only a forged one.\textsuperscript{128} Or rather, a starting premise on which Pip chooses to build a fiction. He is right, therefore, in asserting that he is “tormented by a perversion of ingenuity,” with the exception that it is not Miss Havisham’s ingenuity, but his own. If we take ingenuity to connote “capacity for invention or construction; skill or cleverness in contriving or making something …. Skilfulness of contrivance or design” (“ingenuity, def. 6a”), we can understand, both through the concept of design, which we have established is inherent to the concept of plotting, and through the idea of contrivance, which wonderfully brings together connotations of scheming and artificiality (“ce qu’elle a de concerté”), the ways in which Pip plots, and for two thirds of the novel, plots erroneously.

Have we, however, somehow confounded the notions of reading and plotting? Is there a slippage between the two which we have failed to take into account? I am fully aware of the disjuncture between the plots surrounding Pip, working, we could say, independently of him, and Pip’s own readings of these plots. Nevertheless, and especially because this is a first-person narration, the way in which Pip reads and interprets the world around him constitutes in itself a form of plotting. We briefly touched on this when we discussed the plot of Gennaro’s paternity. In other words, the passage quoted above is a representation of the plot Pip creates in his mind, a plot that will no doubt be discarded as it will turn out to be untrue, but that nonetheless retains narrative value. The passage is significant because it speaks of the extent to which reading is a constructive activity—not a means to receive meaning, but an instrument in the very creation of it. This is, as Pip tells us, a “perversion of ingenuity.” The meaning wrested counterfeit because subsumed under his desire.

\textsuperscript{128} The concept of the counterfeit saturates both novels. In \textit{Great Expectations}, we see it not only through the more obvious Magwitch plot, but also in Joe’s forgery. It is in the polysemy of \textit{forgery} that the novel’s central themes are, as it were, amalgamated.
This desire, as is perhaps all too plain, is the desire to marry Estella. Or rather, and here I would like to make a slight adjustment to an assumption that has been implicit throughout our analysis so far, Pip desires to become a gentleman because of Estella. Perhaps a matter of semantics, but this slight adjustment incorporates into our study Brooks’s implicit vision of the novel as a Bildungsroman and the centrality of the Magwitch plot while refusing to downplay the importance of the romantic plot. It also allows me to advance my proposition regarding the structural role of Estella in the narrative. As mentioned before, Pip’s feelings for Estella are often voiced in the prepositional form, which we interpret to reflect the relationality and influence of her character. He himself recognizes that the reason for his wanting to become a gentleman is “the beautiful young lady at Miss Havisham’s, and she’s more beautiful than anybody ever was, and I admire her dreadfully, and I want to be a gentleman on her account.” Having made this lunatic confession, I began to throw my torn-up grass into the river, as if I had some thoughts of following it.

“Do you want to be a gentleman, to spite her or to gain her over?” Biddy quietly asked me, after a pause.

“I don’t know,” I moodily answered. (2740-2744)

This passage demonstrates one of the metaphysical aspects of desire that René Girard tasks the novelistic genre with revealing, namely, its triangularity.

According to the theory of triangular desire put forth in Mensonge romanti que et vérité romanesque, desire is made up of the subject who desires, the desired object, and a mediator.

“Dès qu’il y a vraiment désir … nous retrouvons le médiateur” (23) / “As soon as there is really

129 They also take the shape of the conjunctional. Of course, prepositions and conjunctions express relation and enable connection, respectively—two key aspects of the plotting activity. Taking this into consideration, can we speak of the grammar of desire as the thrust of plot in terms of the prepositional and the conjunctional?
desire … we find the mediator” (21), writes Girard, for whom metaphysical desire is never ultimately linear. Linear desire allows for the existence only of the desiring subject and the object of desire; it assumes that desire is spontaneous and rooted in the object itself or, the other side of the coin, in the free will of the desiring subject. This conception of desire, Girard affirms, is a lie, “[une] illusion d’autonomie à laquelle l’homme moderne est passionnément attaché” (24) / “the illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted” (16). Instead, desire is triangular insofar as it is mediated by a model that either suggests or imposes the desired object onto the subject. Thus, metaphysical desire—the desire that Girard attributes to the romanesque as opposed to the romantique—is always desire according to, a prepositional modality that, as we explained in the previous pages, governs Pip’s rapport with Estella. This is an important point of enquiry: Girard’s model forces us to rethink some aspects of the novel that might seem obvious on a first look. For instance, the prepositional quality we have highlighted does not itself suggest that Estella is the object of Pip’s desire, but rather that she is the mediator. This might seem counterintuitive, but even the syntactic construction of Pip’s speeches points to the influence Estella exerts over him, not as the ultimate goal of his desire, but as the mediating force that informs his conception of the world. The case is the same with Elena, who does not desire Lila but desires, prepositionally, through her. Hers is, like Pip’s, an obliteratoring desire insofar as her successes and failures, her aims and disappointments, are all read and processed via Lila.

130 We have arrived at yet another narrative geometry that stands in opposition to linearity. Though not strictly on the same plane as the geometry of the tangle, Girard’s triangular figure can inform our conception of the antilinear strands of the Quartet, as best exemplified by Lila. Similarly, as is our goal to explore, his model of desire is just as pertinent, if not even more so, to the Quartet than it is to Great Expectations. Much of the rivalry between Elena and Lila is a manifestation of this geometry.
If I turn to the Gerardian geometry, it is because it grants us a fuller understanding of how the more strictly formational strands of *Great Expectations* are intertwined/entangled with the romantic plot. If Pip’s aspirations to become a gentleman constitute the *Bildung* strand of the novel, Estella’s structural presence utterly destabilizes and reconfigures this ambition, predicking it not on an inherent sense of male determination, but on romantic fixation. Historically the genre of male plots, the *Bildungsroman* often placed ambition as the main force driving plots forward and propelling protagonists on their way to assimilation. Fraiman’s study is once again of great help to us. She points out that while certainly few novels of formation have the sort of assimilative ending of *Wilhelm Meister*, the alleged ur-*Bildungsroman*, most if not all thrive on the notion of movement. She goes on to note the presence of two closely related imperatives in the genre: individualism and mobility (126), writing:

> For if the novel as a genre is notoriously about the individual in society—according to Ian Watt’s history, arising alongside and enabled by Carthesian, capitalist, and Calvinist conceptions of the individual—then the *Bildungsroman*, as Dilthey and Howe and others have defined it, brings this deep structure of the novel to the surface. Or if, as Fredric Jameson rephrases Watt’s account, the nineteenth century novel does not reflect individual selves but rather works itself to produce a “mirage” of isolate subjectivity, then the classic *Bildungsroman* would seem to do this especially well. (125)

Fraiman’s own study works toward deconstructing this mirage of isolate subjectivity. She insists “less on the progress of an alienated individual than on her or his constitution by manifold social relationships—once again, attending less to the single-minded development of one character than
to the tangle of conflicting notions about development and the dueling narratives that result” (125). Once again, the figure of the tangle.

While Fraiman identifies these dueling narratives in novels like *The Mill on the Floss*, I want to use Girard’s model to understand how *Great Expectations*, as one of the most classical novels of the genre, destabilizes Pip’s *Bildung* through the presence of Estella, thus undermining the imperatives that Fraiman points out: individualism, on the one hand, by qualifying Pip’s ambition through the mediation of desire, and on the other, mobility, by revealing Pip’s movement to have been tainted all along by the counterfeit, his movement a derailment of desire. The novel, rather than following the traditional path of a young man’s *Bildung* (in which everything is subordinated to the protagonist), instead derails its genetically inherited trajectory through “the most powerful expression of obsessive love for a woman in Dickens” (Tomalin 315).

This is a different sort of derailment, yet still related, to that outlined in *L’amica geniale*. Estella is, like Lila, a distraction to the plot of the novel. This does not mean that the Magwitch plot is the “central energy of the text,” but rather that an internal resistance to the inherited genre of the *Bildungsroman* is at work in the novel, thematized in Estella’s plot. If the plot of Pip’s expectations is vertical—movement as represented by ambition for social *ascent*—the romantic plot is horizontal or diagonal, always threatening to sidetrack. But as we mentioned before, the plots are inextricably tangled. Girard points out: “l’élan vers l’objet est au fond élan vers le médiateur” (19) / “the impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator” (10). Pip is “disgusted with my calling and with my life” and he wants to become a gentleman

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131 This does not mean, however, that one can properly speak of a collective *Bildungsroman*, as Caterina Falotico calls the Quartet (“Elena Ferrante” 98).
132 Pip does redeem himself morally at the end of the novel, but despite this victory, I agree with Claire Tomalin that “his story is one of failure” (314).
because of Estella—not because he loves her, but because he cannot help loving her and because this love is in fact entangled with feelings of humiliation and subordination that mark their relationship from its inception. She recognizes the complexity of Pip’s feelings. “Do you want to be a gentleman, to spite her or to gain her over?” she asks (2743). Of course, Pip does not know.

He does not know because he recognizes that it is only after Estella has called his hands “coarse” and his boots “thick” that they have, in fact, become coarse and thick. It is, finally, after Estella has called him a “common laboring-boy” that he sees himself as so. We must note a small addition to the triangular model, however. Girard writes that “le prestige du médiateur se communique à l’objet désiré et confère à ce dernier une valeur illusoire,” so that, ultimately, “le désir triangulaire est le désir qui transfigure son objet” (25) / “the mediator’s prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object” (17). This transfiguration is nowhere as manifest as when Pip returns to his home from Miss Havisham’s for the first time, pondering “generally that I was in a low-lived bad way” (1588). Yet while Girard speaks of a mediator granting dignity to the object of desire, the Pip-Estella relation shows us that in order for the object (life as a gentleman) to be desirable, the issue of subalternità is crucial to Lila and Elena’s friendship as well, except the type of relationality of subordination between the two friends is best expressed by the image of the swing/altalena (as Elena herself recognizes). Pip, on the other hand, remains Estella’s subaltern throughout the novel, with the possible exception of the ending.

I have often thought of Dickens’s and Ferrante’s portrayal of characters of lower social stature. Pip and Biddy remain unquestionably positive figures. My reluctance to the word notwithstanding, they are simple, but wise in their simplicity, and perceptive. On the other hand, Mrs. Joe, Pumblechook, Orlick, and others, remain unquestionably negative. But the rich are not exempt either, as in the arrested Miss Havisham or the sinister Jaggers. Whether Dickens is trying to advance a point about status remains questionable to me. Ferrante has written of a “certa napoletanità non redenta, non redimibile, di scarsa dignità narrativa, fastidiosa” (62) / “a certain Neapolitanness, unredeemed and unredeemable, lacking narrative value, irritating” (67). The issue of redemption resurfaces (one and the same with the issue of colpa). This unredeemable quality extends to characters beyond Naples, albeit in different ways. What commentary on education are Ferrante and Dickens putting forth? Is Dickens falling for the fear of “worldliness” and impurity that pervades so many nineteenth century novels?
something else must become undesirable first.\textsuperscript{135} The transfiguration we witness upon Pip’s return home is the transfiguration of his current life from a quiet, dignified existence to an undignified life unworthy of Estella. That this transfiguration immediately succeeds the onset of the convict plot is not a fact to overlook.\textsuperscript{136} Much like the originary scene in the churchyard initiates the subterranean workings of the convict plot, the originary scene at Satis House initiates the plot in a more explicit way by birthing Pip’s desire, which constitutes not only the initiatory force behind the act of narration, but its main thrust. Not to be ignored here either is the role that shame plays in this transformation: the guilt, in fact, that follows Pip and Elena throughout their lives is in intimate conversation with the shame that they develop vis-à-vis their origins and that marks them, in a way, as class traitors. Once Joe’s best friend, Pip becomes mortified by the smith’s behavior the moment he returns from Satis House, a shame that is clearly not developed in a vacuum but is rather the direct consequence of Pip’s exposure to the world signified by Miss Havisham and Estella. Elena demonstrates a parallel shame of her origins that is localized specifically in Immacolata and Lila, who nevertheless starkly refuse the meek and subaltern role that Joe adopts in \textit{Great Expectations}. The subjects of shame and embarrassment deserve a much deeper examination of their own; for now, it is sufficient to observe a direct relation between shame and desire.

We could say that there is no desire in the narration before Pip’s arrival at Satis House; his apprenticeship to Joe not a desired path, but simply the acceptance of an inevitability. If the

\textsuperscript{135} See, for instance, how this dynamic is more than present in Elena’s desiring, in which Lila acts as mediator, not object: “da quando Lila aveva smesso di incalzarmi, di anticiparmi nello studio e nelle letture, la scuola, o anche la biblioteca del maestro Ferrato, aveva smesso di essere una specie di avventura” (\textit{AG} 182-3) / “since Lila had stopped pushing me, anticipating me in my studies and my reading, school, and even Maestro Ferraro’s library, had stopped being a kind of adventure” (\textit{MBF} 187).

\textsuperscript{136} Of course, Miss Havisham summons Pip “a full year after” the hunt on the marshes (1204), yet the events are contiguous in the \textit{sjužet}, hence bound by the plotting activity in a sequential manner that borders on the \textit{consequential}.\n
\begin{figure}[h]
birth of desire is one and the same with the birth of Pip’s plot, we can begin to understand how
the story might be the result of a “perversion of ingenuity.” By laying bare the workings of
triangular desire, and in the process doing away with the Bildungsroman’s myth of individuality,
Great Expectations provides us with a narrative figure of deviance. Insofar as the verb to pervert,
 apart from its moral connotations, means “to turn aside … from the correct meaning, use, or
purpose; to misapply, misconstrue, distort” (“pervert,” def. 1b), we could say that the novel’s
plots are doomed to be discarded because they are, from the very start, erroneous, misdirected.
They are so for two reasons, both of which have to do with desire. Firstly, because in revealing
Pip’s borrowed desire and unveiling the “mirage” of his subjectivity, the novel reflects on and
interrogates its own inherited genre; if, as Fraiman declares, individualism and mobility are
central to the Bildungsroman, Great Expectations is at once the most representative and the most
problematic novel of the genre. Pip’s mobility, on the one hand, is tainted with the criminal and
consequently rendered unviable—his individualism, on the other, is revealed as an illusion of his
borrowed desire. Insofar as Pip’s is supposed to be a plot of Bildung, it is inevitably perverted,
“turned away” from the classic plot of Bildung, “diverted to a wrong end or purpose.”

The question of ends and purposes arises once again. L’amica geniale provides us with a
vision of narrative ends and purposes manipulated because subject to Elena’s punitive impulses:
Is the case the same in Great Expectations? If Elena is the master plotter of her own story, what
to make of the fact that Pip seems to be in a more passive position, himself surrounded by
countless other, much more capable plotters? To arrive at an answer, we must dissect the
workings of Pip’s desire. Girard speaks of another transfiguration involved in his triangular
geometry: “Le sujet,” he writes, “s’attache à un médiateur que son désir transfigure. Il croit
conquérir son individualité en désirant cet être mais en réalité il la perd car chacun est victime de
la même illusion” (179) / “The subject clings to a mediator who is transfigured by his desire. He
thinks he is heightening his individuality by desiring this being, whereas in reality he is losing it,
for everyone is the victim of the same illusion” (174). Whereas desire transfigures life at the
forge into an undignified path and life as a gentleman into a worthy object, it also works to
transfigure Estella. Pip is sure that her coldness is a façade in service to Miss Havisham’s whims
and wrongly believes that she is willing to marry him after she has “gratified [Miss Havisham’s
revenge] for a term.” In this “wrongly” lies one of the chief nodes of tension in the novel, for the
desire that Pip uses as guiding light is deceptive. “Du médiateur, véritable soleil factice, descend
un rayon mystérieux qui fait briller l’objet d’un éclat trompeur” (26) / “From the mediator, a
veritable artificial sun, descends a mysterious ray which makes the object shine with a false
brilliance (18), continues Girard. But are we to assume that Pip’s desire is misdirected simply
because it is borrowed? Girard suggests that triangularity is itself inherent to the dynamics of
metaphysical desire and that all true novels are tasked with making these workings evident. No
“pathology” then, as it were. We must search for the malfunction elsewhere.

There is yet another aspect of the novel’s treatment of desire at the root of this
perversion. As we have said, the romantic plot is cleft: Estella, mediator of Pip’s desires, on the
one hand; on the other, Miss Havisham, to whom we previously attributed the structural role of
apparent donor. But can Miss Havisham’s role in the novel’s economy of desire be reduced to
that of red herring? And if we accept that Pip desires through Estella, how is this prepositionality
expressed in Estella herself? Before even asking whom Estella desires through, we must ask
what and even if she desires. “You must know,” she warns Pip, “…that I have no heart,—if that
has anything to do with my memory … Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in … But you
know what I mean. I have no softness there, no—sympathy—sentiment—nonsense” (4716-
4721). Later, during the recognition scene of Pip’s rhapsody, Estella will remind him of her warning, to which Pip will respond: “Surely it is not in Nature,” prompting Estella to answer, in turn: “It is in my nature … in the nature formed within me. I make a great difference between you and all other people when I say so much. I can do no more” (6951-6954).

This seems to me a particularly important remark. As a novel of sentimental Bildung, *Great Expectations* is also forked: Pip’s sentimental education is naturally the novel’s central concern, whereas Estella remains the other, a most disconcerting figure of perverted development and a harsh commentary on the novel’s investment on education. “In the *nature formed* within me” is a statement in defiance of clear-cut distinctions between nature and nurture. In Estella coincide the plots of corruption derived from her biological and adoptive parentage. Through Magwitch and Molly, the corrupt takes on the shape of the criminal. But it is through Miss Havisham, her adoptive mother, that the figure of arrested, corrupt plot is most effectively communicated. As Trotter states in his introduction to the novel, Miss Havisham “is the novel’s most arresting image of arrest” (224-225). If by the time we are introduced to her, Miss Havisham has been unsuccessfully mourning for thirteen or fourteen years, any plot initiated through her desire is bound to be corrupt. I intend the word corrupt here to denote not the sort of criminal stain that Pip associates with Magwitch and Newgate, but a figure of perversion, which, as we have discussed, is itself an image of the misdirected and unviable. To begin to place in conversation Miss Havisham’s arrested plot and its effects on the narration with

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137 This is yet another manifestation of the curious relationship between plotting and memory, which we have discussed in terms of Forster’s own thoughts on plotting and Lila’s faulty memory. If, in this case, Estella has “no heart,” and therefore no desire, it is expected that she has no memory either. She is deemed to be plotted, never plotter.

138 I make these calculations based on Dickens’s own notes (presented as an Appendix to the Penguin edition cited here), which state that Pip “was about 7 at the opening of the story” and that Miss Havisham’s matter happened “6 or 7 years before Pip, and Estella—who is about his age—were born” (9713-9715).
the metabolic model we advanced in our discussion of *L’amica geniale*, we take corrupt to connote, too, a state of decay. This rottenness entails an arrest, an origin that is much too close to the inorganic to allow for the successful development of other plots. Any sprouts coming from this putrid plot bound themselves to putrefaction.

The novel, of course, consciously invokes both aspects of corruption, all while placing them in the context of the nature/nurture debate. While Estella’s biological parentage bears the stamp of the criminal, it is her association with Miss Havisham that most informs her *Bildung*. If she does not have a heart—does not, therefore, desire—it is because Miss Havisham has stolen it away “and put ice in its place” (7616). This coldness echoes Miss Havisham’s earlier reproach to Estella—“You stock and stone! … You cold, cold heart!” (5901)—and stands in contrast to the images of fire in the novel. Fire, in the context of the forge, is a force that unites: “Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility … from all those visions that had raised her face in the glowing fire, struck it out of the iron on the anvil” (4685–4689). It is also one of the novel’s many metaphors for formation. If iron is seen as a force of nature, sometimes too heavy (as in the case of Magwitch, dragged down by the iron on his leg), fire could be seen as the potential of nurture to alter the individual (most notably in Estella). The way fire shapes iron mimics the way characters are shaped in the novel and intimates that, in the world of *Great Expectations*, formation can be a brutal enterprise: Pip has been brought up by “jerks,” Estella through hate, Joe was “hammered” by his father (1237), Magwitch “whipped and worried” (6643).

Arguably, Estella remains the novel’s most pitiful figure, if only because of her tragic awareness. “I must be taken,” she says, “as I have been made. The success is not mine, the
failure is not mine, but the two together make me” (5946-5948). Her condition is a direct result of the arrest of Satis House. Brooks writes:

The craziness and morbidity of Satis House repose on desire fixated, become fetishistic and sadistic, on a deviated eroticism that has literally shut out the light, stopped the clocks, and made the forward movement of plot impossible. Satis House … constitutes repetition without variation, pure reproduction, a collapsed metonymy where cause and effect have become identical, the same-as-same. (119)

As Brooks points out, the very state of Satis House precludes the salutary forward movement of any plot. Like the plot of Tina in Storia del cattivo sangue, the plot of Miss Havisham’s abandonment is hypothyroidic, unable to be discharged and, consequently, incondusive to development. In this case, the narration’s structure does not bear the brunt of the metabolic disorder, the way L’amica geniale does, because Satis House is not at the center of the novel and because Pip’s role will be to reactivate the energies of the house. As stated in Chapter 1, hypothyroidism can result in a deficiency of the catabolic functions charged with releasing energy, which, according to our model, is necessary to initiate plot. Satis House is characterized by an excess of anabolic functions—the constructive aspect of metabolism—best exemplified in the perpetual repetition without variation that Brooks identifies. Any plot that sprouts from it is bound to be counterfeit—parallel to the pregnancy-turned-uterine-fibroids of L’amica geniale—any creation an aberration.

But, we say, Satis House is representative of the entire romantic plot of Great Expectations. How can this be possible if no plot can truly come from it? The answer is twofold. Strictly speaking, the arrested, hypothyroidic plot is that of Miss Havisham’s failed romance. Corrupted by hatred, it has turned on its head and become a revenge plot that necessitates the
figure of Estella in order to sprout into something that extends beyond the rotting walls of the House. But if Estella does not desire, and the hypothyroidism of the House cannot by itself engender plot, a further component is necessary. Pip becomes this extra component; his desire ignites and releases the necessary energy for Miss Havisham’s revenge plot to take the guise of the novel’s romantic plot. A passage during one of Pip’s many returns to Satis House is illustrative of this. It depicts Pip’s entire misreading of his plot and, at the same time, provides with an image of his structural role:

She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going and the cold hearths a-blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin,—in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. (4604-4607)

Much of what we have discussed is conveyed here: the issue of intention, Pip’s role in revitalizing Satis House, his misreading of the fairy tale plot.

Although Brooks claims that Compeyson is the “arch-plotter” of the novel (133), Miss Havisham herself, albeit victim of Compeyson’s plot, is a close contender for the title as well. Her plotting is too successful, as Brooks points out, in that her creation expectedly turns against her, an insurrection prefigured in Pip’s description of the two: “She hung upon Estella’s beauty, hung upon her words, hung upon her gestures, and sat mumbling her own trembling fingers while she looked at her, as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared” (5868-5870). This reference to Cronus, leader of the Titans who devoured his children after a prophecy revealed to him that one of his sons would defeat him, foreshadows Miss

139 Rhea, Cronus’s sister and wife, plotted so that Zeus, her sixth child, would be saved from this fate. She gave Cronus a stone wrapped in child’s clothing, pretending it was their son (Woodard 88). Eventually,
Havisham’s defeat at the hands of her own adopted child. It also highlights the issue of time: admittedly, Chronos as the personification of time and Cronus the Titan are not identical figures, yet both have been related and even interchanged throughout the centuries, so that it would not be farfetched to assume that in referencing the infanticidal Titan, Dickens was simultaneously providing us with an image of the actual time that has consumed Satis House. I write “actual” to point to the discrepancy between the time of plot, arrested (the clocks stopped at twenty minutes to nine) and chronological time, unstoppable and all-consuming.\textsuperscript{140} Pip notices this: “everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers…” (1449-1451).

Through metonymic substitution, Pip observes what \textit{was} through what \textit{is}, the white through the “faded and yellow.” The appearance of Miss Havisham and Satis House reveals exactly how the devouring qualities of chronological time act on a plot that has been arrested. The withered here acts as a figure for the corrupt. Miss Havisham’s is a peculiar position in the narrative because, though the arch-figure of arrest, it is her desire for revenge that allows for much of the energy in the novel to be released. But any of the energies needed for the revenge plot to be activated can only be released by a figure that has \textit{not} been arrested, by “young blood,” as it were. Estella and Pip become instrumental in this. That Pip misreads Miss Havisham’s

\textsuperscript{140} Zeus gave Cronus an emetic to forcefully disgorg e the children he had devoured, thus unleashing the Titanomachy. Because we have been trafficking in metabolic metaphors, I wonder if this disgorgement can find an equivalent in Miss Havisham’s penitential deathbed scene. It certainly finds a very interesting correlative in the novel if we turn to the term’s legal denotation. To disgorg e means “to give up (as illegally gained profits) on request, under pressure, or by court order especially to prevent unjust enrichment” (“Disgorge”), precisely the fate of Magwitch, Estella’s biological parent. We find, therefore a particularly interesting displacement of the mythological figure of Cronus: Miss Havisham as the authorial figure insurrected against, Magwitch as the authorial figure forced into disgorgement. Although “chronological time” is equivalent to Genette’s narrative time, what I term here plot time is \textit{not} comparable to his discourse time. Plot time is figural, symbolic of a plot’s metabolic transactions.
intentions entirely and believes himself to be the Prince to let light back into the house is not only important as well as misguided, but also compulsory for the plot of the novel. His intention to “set the clocks a-going” cannot but engender a corrupted plot precisely because it is engendered by Miss Havisham’s unprocessed trauma.

We have arrived here at an important observation regarding the issue of authorship. Brooks identifies in the revelation of Magwitch’s patronage the simultaneous “intrusion of an aberrant, contingent authorship…in the story of the self” (130). While I do not necessarily disagree with his assessment, I have been trying, in these pages, to demonstrate that a conterminous line of plot—the romantic plot, and, at its origins, the plot of Miss Havisham—provide an even stronger “aberrant” authorship, in that, if the convict plot has rendered the plot’s mobility corrupt, Miss Havisham’s manipulation has rendered Pip’s individualism counterfeit, a mere illusion, by dint of revealing itself as the source of Pip’s desires. As the revelation scene of the romantic plot illustrates, Pip’s entire reading of the world around him has been guided by his feelings for Estella, and his feelings for Estella, as he recognizes in the same scene, have been manipulated by Miss Havisham. So that we must perhaps retract our previous corrective to Pip’s assessment, for if we stated that it was a perversion of his own ingenuity that torments him, the revelation of Miss Havisham’s authorial desire must inevitably reveal what Pip knew all along, namely, that he was tormented by a perversion of Miss Havisham’s ingenuity, or, what

141 Estella is a tragic figure of the excess of plot. She is the successful result of Miss Havisham’s revengeful impulses. To that extent, I find both endings unsatisfactory, for they allow for a change in Estella. In the published ending, Estella reflects that “suffering has been stronger than all other teaching” (9138). In the original ending: Pip himself writes “that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching” (9705-9706). Far from attempting to psychologize these endings and claiming that Estella’s change is not believable, my point is that, throughout the novel, Estella is a figure for the monstrous yet successful act of plotting, so that a sudden victory of suffering brings into the equation a penitential power that seems out of place.

142 Although, of course, at first Pip interprets this torment as a price to pay for gaining Estella. He is still blind to the fact that “the prize” is not reserved for him.
is the same, by her plotting. Are we therefore forced to make an adjustment to Girard’s triangular figure?

Or have we arrived, instead, at what Girard terms “la mediation double”? In truth, the model we have outlined does not conform to Girard’s conception of double mediation. “Dans la médiation double,” he writes, “la métamorphose de l’objet est commune aux deux partenaires. On peut y voir le fruit d’une bizarre collaboration négative” (106) / “In double mediation the metamorphosis of the object is common to both partners. We can see in it the fruit of a strange negative collaboration” (101); and, later: “Dans la médiation double, on ne désire pas tant l’objet qu’on ne redoute de le voir possédé par autrui” (107) / “In double mediation it is not that one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else’s hands (102). We witness the force of double mediation, instead, in L’amica geniale, in those instances in which Elena not only desires what she thinks Lila desires, but Lila herself desires according to Elena’s triangular desire. We will examine this process at a later point. For now, suffice it to say that nobody’s desire is altered by the process itself, and, moreover, that Pip is so sure that Estella is destined for no one else but him that to fear that she will be “in someone else’s hands” is too outrageous a thought to entertain. Of course, Bentley Drummle could play this role, except that his engagement to Estella is only revealed as the novel lays bare the mechanism of Pip’s desire;
rather than feed the process, the revelation of Drummle’s engagement directly follows the revelation of the convict plot, and it directly precedes Pip’s externalization of his disillusionment.

So if it is not a double mediation, then, what we find instead is that although Pip does desire *through* Estella, Estella, as we have stated, does not desire and is ultimately a vessel for Miss Havisham’s thirst for revenge. The triangular is perverted because it is misdirected. “With my praises,” says Miss Havisham, “…with this figure of myself always before her, a warning to back and point my lessons, I stole her heart away, and put ice in its place” (7615-7617). Behind Estella’s lack of desire is the figure of Miss Havisham herself. The ultimate unresolved realization of *Great Expectations* is not the revelation of Magwitch’s patronage—for the convict plot, as we have said, is not only rightly brought to the surface, but is ultimately, as it were, cleansed through the baptismal scene of Magwitch’s capture (a literal resurfacing) and properly done away with through Pip’s repentance and the establishment of Magwitch’s good intentions—but the revelation of the corrupted plot of Miss Havisham, true author of Pip’s desires:

“Love her, love her, love her! If she favors you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces,—and as it gets older and stronger it will tear deeper,—love her, love her, love her!” …

“Hear me, Pip! I adopted her, to be loved. I bred her and educated her, to be loved. I developed her into what she is, that she might be loved. Love her!”

She said the word often enough, and there could be no doubt that she meant to say it; but if the often repeated word had been hate instead of love—despair—revenge—dire death—it could not have sounded from her lips more like a curse. (4758-4765)
Of course, as many critics have pointed out, the fairy tale/witch tale trope is present in *Great Expectations* from the very beginning, and it is externalized in Pip’s interpretation of Miss Havisham’s words. Dickens’s penchant for the anaphoric, displayed here at its fullest, works in this case to turn Miss Havisham’s words into an incantation, or, as Pip sees it, a curse. A curious trebling of every formulation is present in this passage, similar to the kinds of trebling we identified in *L’amica geniale*, leading us to the inevitable conclusion that the sort of incantatory repetition present in these two novels is itself a figure of the act of plotting, and that the fairy tale mode that both novels adopt, and both novels subvert, is effective insofar as it details the inception of plot during infancy. We might be tempted to find in the figure of Don Achille a direct equivalent of the Magwitch figure (and he certainly is), but Miss Havisham, too, reveals to be the incantatory force of corruption that guides the plot of the novel in a subterranean fashion, exactly as Don Achille does.

We have identified some of the mechanisms behind the metabolic failures in *L’amica geniale*. Is there a similar malfunction in *Great Expectations*? How might that be connected to its much discussed ending? Here, I would like to take recourse to an issue that David Trotter brings up in his introduction to the novel. Trotter mentions Dickens’s reaction to the Great Exhibition of 1851. In a piece called “The Great Exhibition and the Little One,” published in *Household Words*, Dickens compared the English and Chinese exhibitions, praising the first for representing a world in progress and condemning the second for representing a country that had “[shut] itself up, as far as possible, within itself” (357). Dickens’s statement is reflective of economic and cultural issues that are beyond the scope of our examination—issues such as capitalism, free trade, colonialism, and Englishness. However, as Trotter points out,
It would not reduce Dickens’s politics absurdly to say that he was for circulation and against stoppage, and that he wasn’t at all afraid of the literal application of the metaphor to everyday existence. He thought that the lives of the poor could only be made tolerable by the proper circulation of air and water through their living-quarters. … The later novels connect one site of blockage to another metaphorically and metonymically. These sites are both substitutable and contiguous. (qtd. in Dickens 206-215)

We have spoken of blockage before in terms of the metabolic malfunctions of L’amica geniale. While Trotter identifies some of the ways in which blockage is thematized in the novel (not through a metabolic metaphor, but through the image of sclerosis and greasiness), I would like to understand how this blockage impacts the progress of the novel, and if it affects both plots in the same way. As we mentioned, our understanding of the novel is best exemplified by the following breakdown of scenes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magwitch (Convict Plot)</th>
<th>Estella (Romantic Plot)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Originary Scene</strong></td>
<td><strong>A. Originary Scene</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Churchyard)</td>
<td>(Satis House; Courtyard)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Recognition Scene</strong></td>
<td><strong>B. Recognition Scene</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pip’s Apartment)</td>
<td>(Satis House; Dressing Room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Separation Scene</strong></td>
<td><strong>C. Separation Scene</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Prison)</td>
<td>(Satis House; Ruins)</td>
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On the left column, the convict plot. Although the truth of Pip’s patronage is only revealed almost two-thirds into the novel, the progress of the plot itself is never blocked. If anything, precisely because it works subterraneously, the convict plot remains unhindered. In the anagnorisis of the revelation scene, this plot is brought to the surface, inaugurating the novel’s
most carefully plotted volume. I would not go as far as to say that this volume is hyperthyroidic, not insofar as we take hyperthyroidism to be accompanied by a surplus of a text’s catabolic functions, and, thus, an imbalance. On the contrary, this most-plotted of volumes is primarily characterized by how swiftly it binds and discharges all the energies previously released and worked through in covert fashion. Whereas Pip’s attempts to get rid of / save Magwitch are quite literally blocked by a police boat, the plot itself is not, not insofar as it has been reconfigured into the plot of Pip’s redemption, in which the capture of Magwitch is instrumental. Had the escape been successful, we might have witnessed a hyperthyroidism in the text, an unsettling surplus of the criminal—driven out of the country, but not by dint of it driven out of the plot. Instead, what we get is a redemption of the criminal figure (as well as the death of the unredeemable Compeyson) and the subsequent revindication of Pip’s values through the eventual death of Magwitch and the surrender of his property to the Crown (the only viable path to remove the criminal stain). It is only through the Magwitch plot that Pip can arrive at the savoir we have previously discussed. Finally, it is because of the imperative of redemption that the denouement of Magwitch’s plot does not register as catastrophic, a term that we might be more prone to attribute to the romantic plot.\footnote{\textsuperscript{143} I mean catastrophic in its common usage, as bad or disastrous. Interestingly, however, as the \textit{OED} points out, catastrophe is also, in literary criticism, “the change or revolution which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramatic piece” (Johnson); the dénouement” (“catastrophe, n.”). In this sense, Magwitch’s death is nothing \textit{but} catastrophic because it allows for the conclusion of his plot.} 

Trotter, in fact, writes that “there is a sense in \textit{Great Expectations}, as there is not in \textit{Bleak House} and \textit{Little Dorrit}, that the mysteries cannot be resolved, or can only be resolved by catastrophe” (222-224). I agree with this assertion only as it pertains to Miss Havisham and Estella. In fact, Miss Havisham’s death is brought about by an incident reminiscent of Krook’s death in \textit{Bleak House}, published almost a decade before \textit{Great Expectations}. Much criticized and
mocked by his contemporaries for believing that a human could spontaneously combust, Dickens did not allot Miss Havisham Krook’s death. Still, her sudden flaring up in flames speaks too much of the spontaneous—the arbitrary—as if the end of Miss Havisham could not have been organically arrived at through the workings of plot, as if she had to be extirpated, or, like Tina, had become encysted and needed to be “got out.” Her structural role as donor might end the moment she pays for Pip to be apprenticed to Joe, but because she is the key plotter behind Pip’s misreading of the world, and because the plot of her revenge is executed through Estella, she becomes one of the novel’s strongest agents and the source of much of the novel’s “corruption” to the extent that her plot, because arrested, can only engender corrupted plots. The plot of Miss Havisham needs to arbitrarily burst into flames because it is blocked—because, like Satis House, it has been shut off.

Not by chance does Pip discover that truth of Estella’s parentage in the chapter immediately succeeding Miss Havisham’s incident. The uprooting of the corrupted plot brings Pip one step closer to not being blinded by his desire. Which does not mean that it can make it disappear. In leaving for Egypt, Pip imitates Madame de Clèves, who, as Girard writes, renounces the world of triangular desire: “Mme de Clèves voit enfin l’avenir qui l’attend; elle refuse de participer à ce jeu infernal ; en s’éloignant de la Cour elle échappe au monde romanesque et à la contagion métaphysique” (180). In leaving England, penniless and hopeless of ever marrying Estella, Pip distances himself from what Girard calls metaphysical contagion. His failed attempt to propose to Biddy gives us a glimpse of the plot’s inability to return to its “correct” path once it has been, as it were, infected not only with the
workings of desire, but specifically of misdirected desire, so that Pip’s only alternative is to fully remove himself from the equation. An ultimately impossible task, the novel seems to suggest in that disquieting last chapter, which is not an epilogue, much as it feels like one.

Before we get to what Brooks calls a “reactivation of energies” in the encounter with Estella, however, the chapter offers us an image of domestic bliss positioned as a sort of corrective to the entire novel. Joe and Biddy’s family presents itself as an alternative image of what Pip’s plot could have been, had it not been “perverted.” Many of the agents are the same, in fact, or at least their function. Joe remains the father figure in the unit; Biddy has taken the place of Mrs. Joe, thus providing an image of what the cruel Mrs. Joe should have been; in the same manner, Pip somewhat unsettlingly comes to occupy Pumblechook’s place, a benevolent Pumblechook: “(but I did not rumple his hair)” (9078), he specifies. Most telling of all is the name of Joe and Biddy’s son, Pip. Just as the novel is about to leave us with an intimation that Pip’s plot might be correctly made over by the subsequent generation, a generation that will not be “naturally vicious” and “on secret terms of conspiracy with convicts,” a generation, in other words, whose plots will not be perverted, Pip decides to revisit Satis House “for Estella’s sake” (9094).

Our reading of this ending scene hinges on our understanding of its positionality in the plot. We could read it scene as part of the necessary denouement that follows Magwitch’s capture; after all, we had somewhat prematurely left Estella after Pip’s ecstatic rhapsody, and though knowledge of her marriage was communicated, the romantic plot seemed too unresolved, abruptly cut off by Pip storming out of Satis House. We could also read this scene as a disturbing indication that Pip has not been “cured” of his desire—not by a decade, not by moving a continent away. My own reading borrows aspects from both possibilities, for I do think that
leaving Estella at Satis House would have left energies in the text unbound, as if the mere externalization of his obsession with Estella would have cured Pip of said obsession. If, as we have tried to explain, the romantic plot is inextricably tied to the convict plot and Pip’s expectations, and, moreover, provides the main thrust for it, to set aside the romantic plot three fourths into the story in order to prioritize the novel’s other vein would have implied a serious energetic imbalance. Brooks’s negligence of the romantic plot leads him to overlook this. In fact, he goes as far as to suggest that the romantic plot is finally bound not in what I call the recognition scene (Chapter 44), but six chapters before it:

The recognition scene [of the convict plot] comes in chapter 39, and it is preceded by two curious paragraphs at the end of chapter 38 in which Pip as narrator suggests that the pages he has just written, concerning his frustrated courtship of Estella, constitute, on the plane of narration itself, a last binding of that plot in its overt version, as a plot of romance, and that now he must move on to a deeper level of plot—reaching further back—which subsumes as it subverts all the other plots of the novel. (127-28)

I entirely disagree with the suggestion that such binding ever occurs—as I will attempt to explain—and am even more surprised that Brooks would suggest that it happens before Pip’s ecstatic rhapsody. Failing to discern the importance of this scene implies a failure to discern the extent to which both lines of plot rely on each other.

Still, one thing is worth noticing about Brooks’s statement: the fact that he alludes to the binding of the plot in its overt version. Here, I would like to adjust my previous remark in which I stated that the ending is a form of denouement in order to posit that it entails a form of reprise (or, as Brooks would have it, a reactivation) of the energies of the romantic plot. I do not, nonetheless, register this reactivation as a form of authorial failure or a plot inconsistency; it does
not in any way lead me to “prefer” the original ending. Rather, what I call the “separation scene” exhibits aspects of the convict’s recognition scene because it brings to the surface the undercurrent of Pip’s obsession that had been hiding since chapter 44, effecting an interesting subversion whereby, once the explicit plot, the romantic plot is revealed to have worked covertly in the place of the convict plot, only to resurface at the very end. The magnitude of its covert mechanisms is not entirely comparable to that of the convict plot, yet there is an undeniable sense that just as we thought that the story of the convict had ended with Magwitch’s capture in the marshes when Pip was a child, we were also led to believe that the romantic plot had come to an end with Estella’s marriage. But Pip cannot extricate himself from it. He has not been cured of his desire. There is the somewhat disturbing suggestion that he has not even been able to extricate himself from the convict plot, insofar as Estella will always, by mere dint of her genetic composition, lead back to it. “How strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime,” he writes at some point, and this strangeness, of course, is nothing but the arbitrary nature of plotting, which by the end of the novel hints at the “naturally vicious.” As the promising reprise of the Joe-Biddy-Little Pip is about to get the last word, it is intercepted by the image of cyclical and undying desire that has long been in communion with the criminal.

I see evidence of this in the final chapter, specifically in the formulation that Pip uses to explain his return to Satis House moments after he has assured Biddy that he does not “fret” for Estella anymore.

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144 Brooks: “I think it is entirely legitimate to prefer the original ending, with its flat tone and refusal of romantic expectation, and find that the revision, with its tentative promise of reunion between Pip and Estella, ‘unbinds’ energies that we thought had been thoroughly bound and indeed discharged from the text” (136).

145 Elena speaks of a “vizio organico,” which, I argue, plays the same function as the “naturally vicious.”
“My dear Biddy, I have forgotten nothing in my life that ever had a foremost place there, and little that ever had any place there. But that poor dream, as I once used to call it, has all gone by, Biddy, all gone by!”

Nevertheless, I knew while I said those words, that I secretly intended to revisit the site of the old house that evening, alone, for her sake. Yes even so. For Estella’s sake.
(9091-9094)

For her sake. For Estella’s sake. Once again, we encounter the prepositional mode, reflective of just how strong Estella’s influence has been in Pip’s development. If we speak of the grammar of desire as being inherently prepositional, we must admit that the presence of the other, as Girard’s triangular geometry has taught us, is outright necessary for the formation of our desires, and therefore of our own sense of identity and understanding of the world. Insofar as Pip understands his world through plotting (however erroneously), and insofar as plotting itself is fundamentally, as Chapter 2 discussed, a connecting and relational activity, the prepositional must needs take precedence in this activity. Great Expectations also gives us an outstanding example of “quel carattere di intreccio con le storie altrui” (Cavarero 107) / “the interwoven character of others’ stories” (82), allowing us to arrive at a new understanding of the prepositional informed by Adriana Cavarero’s assertions about the fundamentally expositive and relational quality of the self. We will explore this in the next chapter, in relation to Lila and Elena.

Much dwelling on the “original ending” is somewhat pointless—after all, we get the ending that we get—yet I do think it helps to provide us with an alternative image of what a more “resolved” plot might look like. Critics tend to “prefer” the original ending because of its “flat tone and refusal of romantic expectation” (Brooks 136). Yes, Estella is married in this ending, thus precluding any possibilities of a reconciliation, or, as Brooks would have it, a
“reunion.” Yet there was never a union in the first place. Pip and Estella’s relationship was real only as it accommodated the triangularity of desire; anything else was a misreading on Pip’s part. If anything, the original ending provides—if inconspicuously—a stronger sense of closure. In it, Pip seems entirely cured of his desire: “I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be” (9705-9706). We are left with the image of an undesiring Pip and a reformed Estella. It is to this ending that Brooks’s assertion most suitably applies: to the extent that we end with a lack of desire, and to the extent that desire is essential to plot, we are left with “the impression of a life that has outlived plot, renounced plot, been cured of it: life that is left over.”

Instead, for her sake strongly suggests that this desire has not subsided. This does not mean that the published ending in any way advances a promise of romantic rapprochement:

“We are friends,” said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

“And will continue friends apart,” said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her. (9140-9145)

Estella’s reformation notwithstanding,¹⁴⁶ the relationship remains much the same. The passage makes an explicit reference to a parting between the two, and a parting as friends, a parting that, as Pip knowledges, will cause him pain, no less because his desire for Estella has resurfaced. The presence of the mists returns us to the moment when Pip first left the forge, blinded by his desire

¹⁴⁶ The only change, perhaps, is in Estella herself. My reservations about her reformation aside, her change does show what her life without the influence of Miss Havisham can be like.
for Estella, so that the *reprise* of the forge’s new household is overshadowed by a possible *reprise* of Pip’s own misdirected plot. In this sense, the published ending is indeed less romantic and in no way provides the sense of closure that the original ending does. It is unsettling because it suggests that no *savoir* was wrested from Pip’s plot, or that, at any rate, his desire was stronger than any *savoir* that could have been wrested. The exact opposite of Estella’s case, and another surprising turn in the story: whereas we had previously asserted that Estella represented the sinister success of plot, this ending subverts that statement and suggests, instead, that Pip represents the most disturbing effects of a successful plot—of Miss Havisham’s plot. We hear the tenuous voice of the old spinster in the words of Lila: “vi imbroglio tutti” / “I’ll cheat you all”—her earlier curse a condemnation to cyclical desire, sentencing Pip to a perpetual state of emplotment.

What do the novel’s last words suggest? Has Pip accepted that, physical parting aside, he will never truly part with his desire for Estella? Is this scene also a recognition scene? Or perhaps a resignation scene? The novel ends with an image of desire unspent and a submission to it. Given its appearance at the very end, this desire feels out of place, hinting that the leftover of the published ending is not the salutary leftover of a plot nearing its end. In other words, it is not a narrative leftover, but a leftover of desire—an excess of desire. In a nod to the etymology of the word, the ending constitutes a plot that has gone beyond its own boundaries. An excess of plot that will not die because the desire that sustains it will not, either. Unlike in Elena’s text, where we witnessed a premature end to plot in the last *storia*, where the leftovers are narrative

147 The sentence was revised from “I saw the shadow of no parting from her” to “I saw no shadow of another parting from her” in the change from periodical publication to the first edition of the 1862 one-volume edition of the novel.
148 This is an important point, for when we speak of a leftover, we must certainly admit that any plotted novel must have a leftover to signal its own end. Otherwise, what we would get is an in media res ending. Which is certainly possible and has been done; I am here speaking of more traditionally plotted novels.
and unsalutary because protracted beyond a hundred pages,\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Great Expectations} suffers from a case of overemplotment, and therefore from a sort of hyperthyroidism. Although we do not explicitly see the consequences of this hyperthyroidism, we do get an evident sense of the surplus of catabolism—in the form of the energies released by the resurfacing of Pip’s desire—and a deficiency in the anabolic functions needed to bind and formalize these energies. Because the novel ends, these formalizations are not possible, and we are ultimately left with the disconcerting threat of entropy, of chaos as unmitigated desire. The novel ends: the plot doesn’t.

It is precisely this image of unmitigated desire, of excess, I think, that constitutes \textit{Great Expectations}’s strongest resistance to the \textit{Bildungsroman}. The novel interrogates its received genre, not simply by being critical of Pip’s means of social ascent, but by entangling the plot of his \textit{Bildung} with a romantic plot that, by exhibiting the mechanisms of triangular desire, makes evident Pip’s borrowed desire and the perverse power of Miss Havisham’s vengeful plotting, thus decentralizing notions of ascent and the “mirage of isolate subjectivity” that is so important to the genre. While a more overt discussion of the tetralogy is admittedly lacking in this chapter, I hope that my discussion of Pip’s plot will complicate and provide a fuller understanding of Elena’s relation to Lila.\textsuperscript{150} As we will discuss, Ferrante adopts the prepositional model advanced

\textsuperscript{149} I have not discussed the ending of \textit{L’amica geniale}. It is my belief that the restitution of the dolls to Elena reactivate energies in the text that subverts our understanding of its functioning. We will come back to this.

\textsuperscript{150} Here I return to the reviewer who called Ferrante “a 21st-century Dickens.” Admittedly, one of the reasons why she is so lies in her fusion of what is commonly perceived as “high” and “low” art. In fact, Chapter 4 will examine this conflation of disparate styles and registers. As far as this chapter is concerned, and as far as my vested interest goes in these two novels, Ferrante is our Dickens because—whether consciously or not it—in \textit{L’amica geniale} she at once treats most of the themes of \textit{Great Expectations} and works through them in comparable parallel ways, with, however, a clear consciousness of the literary gap dividing both worlds, and therefore infinitely more suspicious of plot and meaning. So, for example, regardless of Pip’s failed \textit{Bildung}, Dickens does not preclude the possibility of a successful upbringing, even if outside the middle-class bounds of classic formation, as evidenced in Joe’s new family. This will be out of the picture in Ferrante. Can we say that Ferrante resembles Dickens most when she most distances herself from him?
by Dickens and complicates it by making Lila a desiring agent, severely altering the energetics of her text. Lastly, I would like us to carry the sense of open-endedness that I identified in the ending of *Great Expectations* over into the next chapter in order to trace its reconfiguration as a form of semantic open-endedness at the service of undermining our exegetic practices. The mysteries that Ferrante leaves unresolved are an instrumental component of this project and contribute to the novel’s treatment of obscurity, the point in which Ferrante most drastically departs from Dickens. For *Great Expectations* concludes with a sense of tension, undoubtedly, but absolutely no mystery, no darkness. Only the excess of desire, shining bright, obliterative: the cause and effect of plot. The end of the novel communicates to us the manipulative potentialities of plot and suggests that, regardless of a text’s imbalances, there is no real freedom from the state of emplotment because, in the end, there is no freedom from the state of desire.\footnote{We might be tempted to state that all along we have been arguing that the *Storia del cattivo sangue* is precisely a breaking free from the powers of plot, even if through metabolic malfunction. However, as we mentioned, it is Elena’s use and abuse of plot that engender this hypothyroidic state, in which, though plot is arrested, it does not cease to exist and attempt to start over. More importantly, as we will discuss later on, the ending of the entire Quartet is an explicit reactivation of the energies of plot. The restitution of the dolls is as suggestive of the cyclical nature of desire, and a desire according to the other, as the mists and Pip’s prepositional language are in *Great Expectations*.} In the beginning was desire. The rest, is plot.
CHAPTER 4. DER GEIST DER STETS VERNEINT

“NE PAS MELER les genres.

Je ne mélerai pas les genres.

Je répète : ne pas mêler les genres. Je ne le ferai pas.”

In the beginning was desire. The rest, is plot. The rest—that is, too, what remains. Albeit in obverse ways, L’amica geniale and Great Expectations suggest that there must always be a residue to stories,\textsuperscript{152} that plot’s inherent tendency to demarcate is constantly countered by desire’s trespassing of said demarcations.\textsuperscript{153} In short, as long desire is inscribed in the genetic makeup of plot, it will always leave a residue behind. Can we then say that all novels that in one way or another dramatize the workings of desire are simultaneously advancing a critique of plot? Perhaps. Though not in the capacity to make such sweeping statements, we do note that in Great Expectations and in L’amica geniale, desire constitutes a form of derailment from plot’s linear trajectory.\textsuperscript{154} This desire is often experienced and expressed in the prepositional form: it can be a desire for the other or a desire through the other, as Chapter 3 claimed in its discussion of mediated desire in Great Expectations; it can be, moreover, a desire to write for, to, with, or over the other, as is most explicitly the case in the Quartet. We must not forget, either, that writing very often is, as Chapter 2 discussed, a means to work through the desire to preserve and possess.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{152} We see in Elena’s text a narrative leftover, whereas in Dickens we see a leftover of desire, representative of hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism, respectively.

\textsuperscript{153} A tension, as it were, between the Apollonian qualities of plot that tend toward organization and the Dionysian resistance to being contained.

\textsuperscript{154} But if desire cannot be separated from the plotting activity, are we then forced to admit that plot always will contain its subversion within itself?

\textsuperscript{155} Milkova writes that “Elena’s text can be seen as jointly written by Elena and Lila, as their collaborative project, as the triumph of feminine friendship” (“The Translator’s Visibility” 171). Part of the goal of this chapter is precisely to explore how Elena’s text is (or is not) permeated by Lila; however, I am wary of describing the text in such an unambiguously positive light. After all, the palimpsestic
The implicit (and necessary) existence of an *other* in the workings of desire, an *other* that is not simply a passive receptacle of our desires but can also be an active influence on them, is highly suggestive of the sort of entanglement we have been discussing thus far. In these pages, I would like to set off from this figure of entanglement, with the understanding of the prepositionality of desire granted to us in Chapter 3, in order to explore the structural role that Lila plays in *L’amica geniale*, as well as the generic tensions that arise from this role, mostly played out in the ways in which Lila’s plot decenters what we take to be Elena’s more classical *Bildung*. In the process of this examination, we will, among other things, discuss Adriana Cavarero’s thoughts on identity, as expounded in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, attempting to reconcile her idea of the narratable self’s relationality to our conception of desire’s prepositionality. The generic issue, in particular as it relates to the *Bildungsroman*, will hopefully provide further insight into the driving question behind the Chapter 3—left unanswered—which dealt with the possible existence of female and male plots. If we began the chapter with a presentiment that the Quartet’s originality vis-à-vis the classic *Bildungsroman* would be revealed by contradistinction with what we assumed to be the most representative novel of the genre, we left it with a sense that even *Great Expectations* subverted the classical trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* through the figure of entanglement. In this sense, I would venture to say that it, too, provides what we have been terming “another geometry of obstructed … development.”

*Note* however, the missing “female” from Fraiman’s phrase, which is, of course, one of the fundamental characteristics of the Quartet.
I do not mean by this to propose a complete revision of the history of the genre, but rather to uncover some of the ways in which the genre itself can be interrogated and undermined from within its own boundaries. Does this in any way diminish the Quartet’s contribution to the development of the *Bildungsroman*? Can we, in the first place, so uncritically apply that loaded term to *L’amica geniale*? A provisional answer to these questions is to be found in the tensions arising from the thematic aspects of the Quartet, constituted by the particularities of the (largely female) Neapolitan lived experience, and the formal aspects that link the work to the transnational genre of the *Bildungsroman*.157 The Quartet borrows from a large array of literary genres, yet I have chosen to focus on the *Bildungsroman* for reasons that will hopefully be made clear in the following pages. As a way to navigate these issues, I take Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s study of the inherent ideology of narrative and the “transgressive invention of narrative strategies … that express critical dissent from dominant narrative” (5) to understand the ways in which Ferrante at once reclaims a narrative tradition and—to borrow Nancy K. Miller’s term—puts an emphasis of her own through the more transgressive veins subtending her plots, represented primarily in the destabilizing figure of Lila and the last installment’s narrative structure.

If *Great Expectations* provided us with an understanding of the reroutings of desire, and by doing so put to the test some of the basic tenets of its inherited genre, it nonetheless did so through the trajectory of an individual, male protagonist. While the novel reflected Girard’s triangularity of desire, it did so through a romantic plot that spoke of obsession and deviated desire. As important as Estella and Miss Havisham are to the plot of the novel, Pip remains its undisputed protagonist—any threat to his structural centrality arguably subsumed under the

157 As Marta Cariello states, declining the *Bildungsroman* in the feminine would entail speaking of a “‘divenire’ continuo più che di una formazione che arrivi a un punto definito” (138) / “continual becoming more than a formation that arrives at an established point” (my translation).
ultimate assertion of his ethical *Bildung*. In fact, though Miss Havisham herself is author, her plot is characterized by arrest, while Estella functions more than anything as a vessel for her adoptive mother. So that, though borrowed, it is Pip’s desire that drives the novel. In short, *Great Expectations* is unquestionably Pip’s novel. The Quartet, on the other hand, presents us with not one, but two protagonists, and female, the desires of each as powerful as the other’s, and thus truly representative of Girard’s double mediation.¹⁵⁸ Not only, for in these two female protagonists, Ferrante postulates two wildly diverse modes of being (and becoming) a woman in the world—two wildly diverse modes of, in other words, plotting existence. This inevitably brings us into the issue of the relationship between the two friends. Much of the criticism around the novels focuses on this relationship, specifically on the narrative duplicity that it effects.

Two adjectives recur in descriptions of this dynamic: specular and symbiotic. Gambaro, writes of a “macchina narrativa duplice e speculare” / “a double and specular narrative machine” (my translation), later adding that “il destino dell’una si configurerà come il perfetto rovescio specular del destino dell’altra” (“Il fascino” 170, 171) / “the destiny of the one will constitute the perfect specular reverse of the other’s” (my translation). That the narration is double appears incontestable; its specularity, however, remains arguable. While a great number of critics use precisely the specular model to reflect on Lila and Elena’s relationship, it seems to me that it

¹⁵⁸ Peter Brooks writes that “narrative, like genealogy, is a matter of patronymics” (302), and while he does concede that the nineteenth century preoccupation with transmission could also (albeit parenthetically) include the mother–daughter relationship, his overreliance on the Freudian Masterplot has been successfully contested by Winnett, who points out that Brook’s approach prioritizes the father–son relationship (and male desire) at the expense of woman (and female desire). Of course, novels in the nineteenth century and beyond have challenged the typical *Bildungsroman*, either through a female protagonist or by juxtaposing the failed formations of male and female characters, as in *The Mill on the Floss*. One way in which Ferrante goes further in her challenge to the genre is by making a transgressive (because female and horizontal) relationship her novel’s central concern. Such a sisterly model helps us counter a typical Freudian framework with a conception of the other that is, following Adriana Cavero’s suggestion, not an abject but an other who is also a narratable self, and counter, too, the *Bildungsroman*’s emphasis on individuality with a relational conception of identity and narration.
forces both characters into a static mode of being, and Elena and Lila are anything but. de Rogatis, on the other hand, writes of “un’alterità incolmabile che ... non può mai essere ridotta a specchio di sé” / “an unbridgeable alterity that ... can never be reduced to a mirror of itself” (my translation), while affirming, too, that “tutto, in Elena e Lila, è sotto il segno della simbiosi” (“Metamorfosi” 126, 124) / “everything in Elena and Lila is under the sign of symbiosis” (my translation). Ambra Pirri, in turn, neatly rules out symbiosis and writes of the friends that theirs “non è mai un rapporto simbiotico” (68) / “is never a symbiotic relationship” (my translation). The lack of a critical consensus might have something to do with the choral aspects of the narrative. de Rogatis, for example, describes the novel’s narration as polyphonic, which contributes to the text’s ambivalence, the latter an important concept through which we can refigure the women’s friendship. “Dire non la contradditoriettà ma l’ambivalenza,” (to say not contradiction, but ambivalence), as Crispino and Vitale rightly point out in their introduction to a volume dedicated partly to Ferrante, precisely on the theme of ambivalence (9). Elaborating on this, Antonia Anna Ferrante explores the difference between the two friends as a form of ambivalence “tra due archetipi di donna, due modelli di soggetivazione: una clitoridea, l’altra vaginale” (153) / “between two female archetypes, two models of subjectification: one clitoral, the other vaginal” (my translation).

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159 Ferrante denies the specular nature of their relationship in La frantumaglia: “Se le due amiche avessero lo stesso passo, sarebbero l’una un doppio dell’altra, a turno si manifesterebbero come voce segreta, immagine nello specchio o altro. Ma non è così” (267) / “If the two friends had the same pace, they would be doubles of each other, by turns they would appear as a secret voice, a mirror image, or something else. But it’s not like that. (277).

160 “La polifonia di Elena e Lila è una forma parlante e ambivalente: la sola che puo dare vita ad un punto di vista femminile in grado di nominare la ferocia cui le donne sono sottoposte senza ridurle al ruolo stereotipato delle vittime” (130) / “Elena and Lila’s polyphony is a speaking and ambivalent form: the only that enable a feminine point of view capable of naming the brutality to which women are subjected without reducing them to the role of victims” (my translation).
These considerations notwithstanding, I have decided to look at the relationship between Elena and Lila as a generic one. Taking a cue from Fraiman’s analysis of *The Mill on the Floss*, this chapter perceives the distance between the two friends “as the space between genres” (130). I am fully cognizant that such an exegetic exercise arguably risks running roughshod over the specificity of the friends’ relationship, yet taking into consideration generic issues grants us a well-rounded understanding of the novel’s genetic composition, and, inevitably, of its characters. I contend that Elena and Lila are the embodiment of Fraiman’s assertion that “when ideology of *Bildung* is driven up against ideologies of femininity urging self-effacement one result may be precisely the splintering and counterpointing of narratives” (140). To add to our list of questions: Is the *Quartet* a “splintered” *Bildungsroman*? Is this “splintering” to be related to *frantumaglia* and Ferrante’s constant reworking of disintegrative imagery? Is Lila’s presence in the novel destabilizing in the same way that Fraiman understands Maggie’s to be in *The Mill on the Floss*? How exactly does her presence preclude any form of “univocità rassicurante” (Curti 41)?

In the beginning was desire. The rest, is plot. The rest. *Il resto*, which in Italian means, among other things, “change,” as in the money returned to a customer when payment exceeds what is owed. This is yet another site of excess, one that reconfigures the act of storytelling as a monetary transaction based on the exchange of services. We have not strayed far from our introductory considerations on Fielding’s pact with the readers of *Tom Jones*. We repeat, what are we, as readers, “paying for”? And what is Ferrante promising to “serve” us? The blurb on the physical edition of the first volume, published in 2011, reads thus:

*L’amica geniale* comincia seguendo le due protagoniste bambine, e poi adolescenti, tra le quinte di un rione miserabile della periferia napoletana…. L’autrice scava intanto nella natura complessa dell’amicizia tra due bambine, tra due ragazzine, tra due donne,
My Brilliant Friend begins by following the protagonists as girls, then young women, around a miserable neighborhood in the outskirts of Naples…. The author digs into the complex nature of the friendship between two children, two girls, two women, following their individual growth step by step, as well as the manner of influencing each other…. It then narrates the effects of the changes that take over the neighborhood, Naples, Italy, over a period of more than fifty years, transforming the friends and their bond. And all of this rushes onto the page with the pace of the great popular narratives. (my translation)

The blurb places emphasis not simply on the friendship between two women, but on the bond between “two children, two girls, two women” and, thus, on their development, their formations. The inclusion of a social context and the explicit mention of its influence on both women situate us in the territory of the Bildungsroman, even if the communal aspect of the novel is indisputably subordinated to the infinitely more private relationship between two women.

Readers who first come to the novel through this blurb are informed in advance that the story they are about to read contains something of the Bildungsroman, something of the historical novel, something of the psychological novel, and, very importantly, something

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161 While Elena’s individual trajectory speaks in particular of the Künstlerroman. In this sense, is the Genettian récit minimal of L’amica geniale: “Elena devient écrivaine”? But our first chapter suggested that perhaps it is: “Elena avenges the loss of her doll.”

162 Donnarumma finds in Ferrante an alternative to the classical historical novel that integrates individual stories with the great events of History. This model, he argues, is not viable anymore: “Il merito di Elena Ferrante, invece, è appunto sapere che esiste un intreccio fra vite individuali e destini generali, ma che quasi mai questo intreccio viene dall’incontro diretto con la Storia” (146) / “Elena Ferrante’s merit,
stylistically akin to the “great popular narratives.” This hybridity has not gone unnoticed by critics. Falotico writes that, in the Quartet, “c’è più sperimentalismo di quanto non sembri” and refers to the fusion of genres “che vanno dal romanzo storico a quello generazionale e di formazione; dal romanzo di fabbrica, aggiornato all’era del computer, al racconto metaletterario e all’autofiction; né manca la detective story” (“Elena Ferrante” 114) / “there is more experimentalism than it appears [and refers to the fusion of genres] that go from the historical novel to the generational and the formation novel; from the factory novel, updated to the computer age, to the metaleterary narrative and autofiction; nor is the detective story missing” (my translation). Santovetti sees in this hybridity a reaffirmation of “i diritti del romanzo, così come l’aveva definito Bachtin: genere onnivoro, ibrido, che vive della commistione di stili diversi, di ‘alto’ e di ‘basso’, e soprattutto che non può fare a meno della riflessione su se stesso” (“Lettura” 192) / “the rights of the novel, just as Bakhtin defined it: an omnivorous, hybrid genre, that lives off of the mixture of different styles, of ‘high’ and ‘low,’ and most of all that cannot do without self-reflection” (my translation). Donnarumma, among others, mentions the

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163 de Rogatis: “In entrambi i casi siamo in presenza di un «ipergenere» in cui si mescolano romanzo e antiromanzo: nella quadrilogia l’epos di una nuova soggettività femminile convive con la frammentazione della grande Storia, il feuilleton e il melodramma confligono con lo sdoppiamento riflessivo del racconto nel racconto, l’ariosa simmetria della struttura è incrinata dall’incongruenza problematica dei personaggi e dei loro destini” (Parole 294-297) / “In both cases we are in the presence of a ‘hypergenre’ in which the novelistic and the antinovelistic come together: in the tetralogy, the epos of a new female subjectivity coexists with the fragmentation of the great History; the feuilleton and the melodrama are in tension with the reflexive doubling of the story-within-a-story; the spacious symmetry of the structure is cracked by the problematic incongruence of characters and their destinies” (my translation). Interestingly, de Rogatis never uses the term Bildungsroman. Santovetti laments that critics and detractors have focused mostly on Ferrante’s debt to popular literature, while “poco si sono sottolineate le affinita con la tradizione ‘alta’ del romanzo: dall’autofiction contemporanea ... e la componente fortemente autoriflessiva, metafinzionale solitamente relegata alla tradizione sperimentale dell’antinovel” (“Lettura” 191) / “little has been said about the affinities with the novel’s ‘high’ tradition: from contemporary autofiction ... and the strong self-reflexive, metafictional component usually relegated to the experimental tradition of the antinovel” (my translation).
presence of the melodrama, which at times slips into the sceneeggiata. In turning to these two
genres, Donnarumma argues, Ferrante “dà anche l’impressione che in quella stereotipia popolare
si sia qualcosa del mito, dell’antropologia e dell’identità di Napoli” (144) / “gives the impression
that in the popular brand of the stereotipical there is something of the myth, of anthropology, and
of Naples’s identity” (my translation).

Others, in particular Elisa Gambaro, have noted that paratextual devices such as the
above-mentioned blurb, the internal division of the novels, and even the covers, place a marked
emphasis on the growth of these two women and thus prioritize the Bildung strain.164 This
invocation of one of the most successful literary genres to come out of the Western literary
tradition cannot be ingenuous—not to a writer so keenly aware of the narrative tradition that she
is inserting herself into, and not in a novel so profoundly concerned with female development in
a male-dominated society. This is an important site of contention, one in which the thematic
aspects of the work must grapple with the formal constraints imposed by the genre Ferrante has
chosen. Two issues must now be addressed. Firstly, it is not my argument that in writing about a
character’s life one must be working within the parameters of the Bildungsroman, and, more
specifically, that in writing about a woman’s life and development, an author is making their
home—or their characters’—in a hostile environment. If I choose to read so much of the
Bildungsroman into the Quartet, it is because Ferrante has expressed an intense awareness of
European narrative history, and, more importantly, because of the stark contrast between her first

164 The divisions are: *Prologo, Infanzia, Adolescenza, Giovinezza, Tempo di mezzo, Maturità, Vecchiaia,*
and *Epilogo.* About the iconography of the covers, Gambaro rightly points out: “la successione studiata
delle iconografie del matrimonio, dell’intesa amorosa, della maternità, quasi tappe canoniche di un
percorso esistenziale al femminile, suggerisce le coordinate del romanzo di formazione” (“Il fascino”
173) / “the studied succession of the iconographies of marriage, romance, maternity, almost canonical
stages of a female existential trajectory, suggests the coordinates of the novel of formation” (my
translation).
three published novels and L’amica geniale. While the themes in these works are strikingly similar, the end products are so stylistically disparate as to lead some to believe that they could not have been penned by the same hand. This distinction underscores the importance of form and genre, just as the prominence of formation—intellectual and emotional—points us in the direction of the Bildungsroman. Secondly, it is not my argument that the Bildungsroman is inherently male, for that would inevitably lead us to look for its female counterpart. Like Fraiman, I am not interested in discovering the supposed essence of an alleged female Bildungsroman. Still, a recognition of the historical and literary prominence of male formation aids our understanding of the tensions at work in novels (especially in the twentieth century) that openly focused on any form of female growth unfolding outside of the bounds of courtship. It is doubtless an artistic restriction, but in a world that still prioritizes male Bildung, any novel that speaks of female formation will have been written against, not simply written.

To understand some of the generic tensions in the Quartet, we can turn to Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s Writing Beyond the Ending, a study of twentieth century women writers that, in some way or another, wrote against. By “writing beyond the ending,” DuPlessis refers to the “transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from

165 Which is, of course, not something I am trying to arguing. Instead, it is a testament to Ferrante’s talent, as well as a direct expression of her views on writing: “Bisogna essere come Diderot, autore contemporaneamente della Monaca e di Jacques il fatalista e il suo padrone, capace cioè di riusare sia Fielding che Sterne. Voglio dire che la grande ricerca novecentesca, dopo le sue salutari violazioni, può e deve saldarsi al grande romanzo delle origini e perfino agli abilissimi congegni della letteratura di genere” (260) / “We need to be like Diderot, the author of both The Nun and Jacques the Fatalist and His Master, capable, that is, of reusing both Fielding and Sterne. The great twentieth-century quest can and should be connected to the great foundational novels, the violations of their tenets, and even the most effective devices of genre literature.” (269).

166 “And perhaps this is the time to jettison once and for all the notion of a ‘female Bildungsroman’—by uncoupling these two terms to release our discussion of female developmental fiction from so much Goethean baggage and relinquish the appeal to a single, authoritative because originary, novel of formation, whether female or male” (13).
dominant narrative” (5). Insofar as narrative is inevitably a charged site of ideology, breaking free from the straitjacketing force of narrative convention can in itself constitute a subversion of ideologies. DuPlessis identifies different modes of resistance in different authors: in Dorothy Richardson, an “enormous lack of story” as a provoking device against typical female plots of seduction and courtship (151); in Virginia Woolf, a “narrative politics [that] value the apparently trivial, not the apparently heroic” (96), as well as the invention of “a narrative center to express postromantic relations among characters” (48); in Adrienne Rich the “attempt to forge an anticolonial mythopoesis” (107). These are all different ways of “breaking the sentence “and “breaking the sequence,” in the formulations that DuPlessis borrows from Woolf. Can we envision this disruptive process as a necessary breach of the literary contract between reader and writer, so that the bill of fare customary for, in this case, the novel of female Bildung departs drastically from what is expected—from what is, ultimately, socially condoned?

We can begin to see how the double, female, and non-romantic “protagonism” of the Quartet is itself a transgressive narrative tactic, the constant “swing” of the friendship a decentering mechanism that deflects any prioritization of individual growth, the emphasis on feelings other than romantic (or even unambivalently friendly) a refusal to predicate female Bildung on the lessons learned in the process of courtship. If the double protagonism of the Quartet poses the biggest threat to the individualism that is so central to the classical Bildungsroman, then the oscillatory movement of Elena and Lila’s “seesaw-ing” friendship works tirelessly to undermine that other imperative of the genre, its mobility. As we will observe,

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167 Returning us to James’s plot that “lapses on a trifle too liquidly.”
168 “Era come se,” writes Elena, “per una cattiva magia, la gioia o il dolore dell’una presupponessero il dolore o la gioia dell’altra. Anche l’aspetto fisico, mi sembrò, partecipava a quell’altalena” (AG 252) / “It was as if, because of an evil spell, the joy or sorrow of one required the sorrow or joy of the other; even our physical aspect, it seemed to me, shared in that swing” (MBF 257).
if Elena’s trajectory speaks mostly of linear formation along the well-trodden path of classical *Bildung*—predicated on education and a tacit acceptance of patriarchal values—Lila’s plot, predicated on absence, provides the text with its most arresting force of destructuration. This rupture originates the moment Lila’s life becomes truncated by her father’s refusal to allow her to continue with her studies. From that moment on, Elena’s more traditional trajectory will be disputed, cast into a doubtful light, or rendered less auspicious by every single one of her friend’s life choices. The novel’s center, in other words, will be constantly *decentered* by the marginal figure of Lila. In this sense, while Chapter 1 of our study unveiled the sinister control that Elena exerts over her text, this chapter will challenge our previous observations by underlining the power that Lila yields over the novel, especially through her disappearance and her orchestration of the return of the dolls.

DuPlassis’s study illuminates my understanding of the last installment of the Quartet in different ways. Her formulation, “to write beyond the ending,” though meant in a different sense, is curiously apt to our discussion of narrative leftovers in Chapter 1, which we then explored in more strictly narratological terms but which can also be understood as a form of ideological transgression through the last *storia*’s refusal to adjust to common conceptions of narrative development, in particular of narrative crescendo. Ferrante is therefore writing beyond the ending by breaking the sentence of her narrative. As a “poetics of rupture and critique,” to break the sentence, DuPlessis writes, “rejects not grammar especially, but rhythm, pace flow, expression” (32). This poetics of rupture is more than pertinent to Ferrante’s much-discussed disintegrative imagery. The rupture can take place on a structural level, as it does in the last *storia*’s “broken sentence,” or it can be thematic, as present in Lila’s episodes of *smarginatura*. It

169 If we adhere to the idea that the story of the Quartet ends with the disappearance of Tina, as we suggested in Chapter 1, then Ferrante is literally writing beyond the ending.
is present in all of Ferrante’s novels, and it signals, on the authorial level, to a resistance against
generic impositions. On a diegetic level, it suggests a failed—or at any rate, tense—negotiation
between the individuality of a character and the ideology which she inhabits.

We must acknowledge here an asymmetrical correspondence in our analysis between
authorial intent and certain strictly diegetic issues. For instance, Chapter 1 sets off from the
assumption that Elena is in charge of her récit, making of the last storia’s narrative leftover a
direct consequence of her punitive impulses and of the laying bare of the artificiality of her text.
In these pages, we imply that it is not Greco, but Ferrante, who employs certain techniques to
challenge dominant narratives. This slippage, to my belief, cannot be avoided, nor should it be,
for it is a fruitful site of critique if we consider that Ferrante has purposely set out to make of the
authorial figure a work in itself, not only through the thematization of authorship in her works,\textsuperscript{170}
but also through the creation of her own authorial figure:

Non è poco scrivere sapendo di poter orchestrare per i lettori non solo una storia,
personaggi, sentimenti, paesaggi, ma la propria figura di autrice, la più vera perché fatta
di sola scrittura, di pura esplorazione tecnica di una possibilità. Ecco perché o resto
Ferrante o non pubblico più. (\textit{La frantumaglia} 238)

It’s not a small thing to write knowing that you can orchestrate for readers not only a
story, characters, feelings, landscapes but the very figure of the author, the most genuine
figure, because it’s created from writing alone, from the pure technical exploration of a
possibility. That’s why either I remain Ferrante or I no longer publish. (247)

\textsuperscript{170} It is very important to note, as Ferrante does, that “l’io narrante nelle mie storie non è mai una voce
monologante, ma scrittura” (258) / “The narrating “I” in my stories is never a voice giving a monologue;
she is writing” (267).
What exactly does this authorial “orchestration” consist in? Guarracino sees it as a sign of ambivalence: “‘Elena Ferrante,’ autrice-personaggia della propria narrazione, ha costruito una persona pubblica che gioca con l’autrice implicita della sua scrittura, esponendo l’ambivalenza del gioco tra corpo autoriale e corpo della scrittura” (81) / “‘Elena Ferrante’, author-character of her own narration, has created a public persona that plays with the implicit author of her writing, exposing the ambivalence of the relationship between authorial and writing body” (my translation). Is this purposeful blurring of identities at the service of making Greco a surrogate for Ferrante, the way some critics see Maggie Tulliver as a vessel for Eliot’s rage? This interpretation, though certainly suggestive, is ultimately limited, if anything because it fails to take into account Lila and the veritable orchestra of characters that fill the pages of the Quartet. Though unfortunately beyond the scope of the present study, Ferrante’s decision to make of herself an artwork seems to me one of the most interesting aspects of her oeuvre, and possibly the most efficient antidote to contemporary overexposure. To return to our remarks on the introductory chapter of Tom Jones, Ferrante seems at once to offer exactly what we want nowadays, autobiographical writing neatly shaped into a story. Tiziana de Rogatis identifies this modern demand and describes Ferrante’s project thus: “Piuttosto che essere il prodotto di un cinico progetto di marketing, questa potente fantasia di memoir ... è un sintomo della fame di realtà nella vita di oggi” (Parole 211) / “Rather than being the product of a cynical marketing project, this powerful fantasy of memoir ... is a symptom of the hunger for reality in today’s life” (my translation).

In La frantumaglia, for example, Ferrante constructs an elaborate persona and ostensibly hands herself over entirely to her readers. But this is a fabricated self—once again, we hear the tenuous voice of an author in the words of Lila: “vi imbroglio tutti” / “I’ll cheat you all.” It is
important to emphasize that this orchestration is not the product of anonymity per se. Take, for instance, Santovetti’s assertion that “paradoxically, the anonymity of Ferrante ensures that these differences between fiction and reality… end up vanishing precisely because the position of distance or closeness of an anonymous writer is not assessable or measurable” (“Melodrama 538). Citing de Rogatis, Santovetti discusses the attribution of fictional facts to the authorial figure made possible by Ferrante’s anonymity. And while readers might certainly do this, I would argue that the novels are not anonymous,¹⁷¹ that a name graces their covers and, more importantly, an authorial figure has been created by Ferrante. The differences between fiction and reality that Santovetti refers to are bypassed by Ferrante when she turns everything into a fiction.²

What, then, do we make of this blurring of identities present on different, asymmetrical levels of the narration? How is this blurring, itself a manifestation of a poetics of rupture, a breach of margins, in particular the margins of identity, as we have been exploring in the previous chapters? Lina/Lila: “la natura stessa del nostro rapporto impone che io possa arrivare a lei solo passando per me” (SBP 17) / “the very nature of our relationship dictates that I can reach...

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¹⁷¹ “I miei libri non sono anonimi, hanno tanto di firma in copertina e non hanno mai avuto bisogno dell’anonimato” (La frantumaglia 235) / “My books aren’t written anonymously; they have a name on the cover, and have never needed anonymity” (244).

¹⁷² I see other instances of this fabricated overexposure in different artistic mediums, most notably in music, perhaps the most conducive for the cult of celebrity. So, for instance, artists like Beyoncé cleverly respond to the pressing demands of a public by allowing their entire lives to permeate their art, but doing so in a strictly artistic way, i.e. an artificial way (concertée). Thus seemingly offering themselves and their private lives entirely to the public, but in truth offering a story. We have, in a way, entered into the territory of autofiction here, though not strictly. Frantumaglia, for instance, is not presented as a narrative, but rather as a collection of essays and interviews, which only serve to create a fictional image of an Elena Ferrante born in Naples, one of three sisters, etc. Somewhat differently, Lemonade is presented as a hybrid of fictional music videos interspersed with actual footage from Beyoncé’s life, which, however, is rendered fictional the moment it is offered to us as part of a wider artistic tapestry. The intricacies of these mechanisms are too delicate to cover in a footnote, though it must be noted that it’s mostly women who must take recourse in this tactic, and it is no coincidence that they are often deemed “calculating.” Of course, detractors who use that term as an insult ignore that artistic production is itself a calculation, an orchestration.

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her only by passing through myself” (SLC 25). This movement toward the other, prepositionally, must inevitably travel through the self. We hear clear echoes of Cathy’s statement about Heathcliff: “he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (1985). It matters little that Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship is romantic (or perhaps the point is that it is beyond romance); like Elena and Lila’s, it reproduces the desire to possess (and process) the other by merging with (and consuming) them, by losing oneself in them, a process that Ferrante has explored ever since the publication of her first novel. How not to read the chiastic ending of L’amore molesto—“Amalia c’era stata. Io ero Amalia” (178)—as a reiteration of “Nelly, I am Heathcliff”? There are important parallels between Heathcliff and his Ferrantean heiresses, Amalia and Lila, not least the inaccessibility of their life stories. As Pauline Nestor writes in her introduction to Wuthering Heights, “lacking a personal narrative, and refusing to provide one, Heathcliff becomes the receptacle of other people’s fantasies. Thus, in a sense he is not so much the perfect mate for Cathy, as he is the perfect Other” (296). He is just like Amalia, whom Delia describes as “morbidamente ambigua” (57), and it is this ambiguity and the aura of mystery with which it envelops Heathcliff, Amalia, and Lila, that determine not the way in which their stories are told, but the way in which stories are told about

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173 As Pauline Nestor writes, in uttering these words, Catherine is “expressing the desire for an impossible symbiosis, for a state of non-differentiation between the self and Other which the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan contends belongs to the realm of the psychological ‘Imaginary’” (306). We have elsewhere stated our reservations about working too strictly within a psychoanalytic framework, yet Nestor’s statement about Cathy and Heathcliff seems to me applicable not only to Lila and Elena’s relationship, but also to most central relationships of Ferrante’s other novels. Elsewhere, I, and many others, have written about the issue of abjection in Ferrante’s early work, especially in Days of Abandonment. Abjection provides an additional understanding of our discussion of evacuations in Chapter 1, while highlighting the viscosity of identity and the hardships of differentiating the self from the other.

174 I have long suspected, in fact, that just as Great Expectations is hidden in the genetic makeup of the Quartet, Troubling Love finds a parent text in Wuthering Heights. The first element to tip in this direction was the violence undergone by Antonio and Hareton respectively, both caught as children between the violence of their elders and victims to it (Antonio is thrown down the stairs, Hareton dropped over a bannister).
them. If I mention this ontological blurring of identities, it is because, in many ways, it is the crux of storytelling itself in the way that Brontë and Ferrante (and, I would argue, Dickens) conceive of it—as a projection of the self that renders the existence of an other vital for the construction of a sense of identity. But that it is a projection cannot be denied, so that one’s identity is revealed as a (and through) a fiction. Such a conception of the relationship between storytelling and self must clash with any genre or form that prioritizes the individual and posits the existence of a stable identity.

These similarities notwithstanding, *Wuthering Heights* remains a largely “antisocial” novel, as Nestor points out (235), its insularity the perfect excuse for the novel’s deep preoccupation with the intricacies of desire and the power of imagination. It remains perhaps a little *too* undisturbed by social issues, making itself more at home in Gothic ground, while the Quartet’s inclusion of a clear social setting must force the story of the two friends to come to terms with more robust ideologies of Bildung and femininity, and, therefore, more “realistic” standards. Hence the splintering that Fraiman speaks of and that Rachel Cusk intimated in her *New York Times* review of *Story of the Lost Child*:

In Elena and Lila, Ferrante’s modern woman is bisected and given two faces... Elena is the woman who fears that her achievements and successes, while having the appearance of feminist autonomy, are in fact the fruits of a continuing, covert slavery to patriarchal values. Lila is the unwritten, unexpressed female potentiality, a more obstinate version of Virginia Woolf’s concept of Shakespeare’s sister. Elena’s lifelong fear—that Lila, while having made no mark on the world, is in fact more brilliant than she is—bites more

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175 I hesitate to use the term, but at least it suggests the ways in which what I have been terming moments of blurred agency in the Quartet are much more dissonant than the fantastical episodes of *Wuthering Heights*. 
deeply, as the two women age, into the very roots of female identity: continuity, stability, the capacity to nurture.

Cusk’s parallel to Woolf seems to me more than apt, not least because Woolf’s preoccupation with male and female ways of thinking is masterfully expressed (though in an understated way) in the geometry of the scribble. Allow me to explain. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Mary notices a student next to her, “copying assiduously from a scientific manual … extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so” (29). Frustrated at not being able to arrive at a conclusion to her query regarding women and fiction, and envious of the student, she suddenly realizes that her “own notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings” (32). I am particularly attracted to this scribble and how it is suggestive of contradiction and stands in sheer opposition to the thought process of the scholar next to Woolf, himself a representative of all males. The geometry of the scribble, moreover, extends to the essay’s trajectory, both structural and thematic, in the sense that Woolf’s stream of consciousness (one of the most blatant forms of opposition to narrative linearity) is mirrored by her wanderings around Oxbridge. The geometry of the nonlinear haunts *A Room of One’s Own*, its purpose to subvert not only narrative modes, but the very way in which thought is allowed to operate.

A similar opposition to the linear dominates in the Quartet, as we have been arguing. de Rogatis contends that the circularity of the frame narrative poses a threat to the novel’s linearity: “L’apparente linearità del ciclo biologico, esistenziale e storico è sabotata dall’anticipazione del finale ad apertura di racconto” (*Parole* 1528) / “The apparent linearity of the biological, existential, and historical cycle is sabotaged by the anticipation of the end at the beginning of the story” (my translation). I disagree; in fact, frame narratives have been a constitutive part of the novel (and even narrative poetry) from its very origins. Anachrony (in Genettian terms) is not
enough to constitute a destabilization of linearity; if it were, we would be forced to admit that the vast majority of novels are, in fact, subverting their own genre. More than a destabilization, narrative frames tend to act as devices that underline the retrospective qualities of storytelling. This is not to say that some sort of destabilization cannot be heightened by a frame narrative; in fact, as I will argue later, the return of the dolls does constitute a serious destabilizing moment in the narrative, yet it has more to do with a residual reactivation and less with a simple return to the origin. Lastly, cyclicality is arguably antithetical to smarginatura, for reasons which will become clearer by the end of this chapter.

Cyclicality aside, Lila remains the locus of the opposition to linearity. She is time and again associated with the scribble/squiggle: we have mentioned the Basic Sight logo (“a swirl around a vertical line”) and Lila’s important assertion that “io sono uno scarabocchio su uno scarabocchio” (SBP 17). As Chapter 2 explored, her association with the scribble/squiggle is a figure for the novel’s resistance against orthodox conceptions of plot; the chapter also placed this in the context of Ferrante’s garbuglio, so that we have now accumulated a series of figures of derailment, and we find in Lila the strongest resistance in the Quartet against the linear aspects of the Bildungsroman. Moreover, if we accept Cusk’s assertion, Lila becomes illustrative of a female way of thinking, as opposed to Elena’s more masculine thought, which, as Cusk asserts, is constantly threatened to be revealed as “covert slavery to patriarchal values.” de Rogatis points this out as well: “La formazione intellettuale di Elena,” she writes, “è una costante imitazione delle parole e della postura maschile, una disposizione passiva a recepire e confermare” (“Metamorfosi” 133) / “Elena’s intellectual education is a constant imitation of masculine words and a masculine posture, a passive disposition to accept and confirm” (my translation).
Two inevitable questions arise: firstly, do our assertions here suggest that the Bildungsroman is unequivocally a male genre, or at least one that it is “maschio nell’intelligenza”?; and, secondly, if A Room of One’s Own is elegiac insofar as it fictionally recreates what has been lost in the violence done to the Archive (among other things, in its reconstruction of Judith Shakespeare’s story), is the Quartet, over three quarters of a century later, dramatizing the same kind of loss—the unsustainability of female genius—by, on the one hand, tilting the scales of protagonism ever so slightly in favor of Elena,¹⁷⁶ and, on the other, by suggesting that Lila has no place—literally—in the narration? More importantly, much as Judith Shakespeare’s section in A Room of One’s Own is a fictional recreation that purports to fill a void left by loss, and is by dint of this inevitably elegiac, is the Quartet the story of something that not only does not exist, but cannot exist? It certainly is an exercise in the impossible, or, in other words, an attempt to tell of a cancellatura. I return here to what I understand to be one of the Quartet’s most important moments, at the beginning of the fourth volume (so, the beginning of the end, as it were). In Chapter 2 of Storia della bambina perduta, Elena imagines how Lila would try to dissuade her from writing about her: “E concluderebbe: io sono uno scarabocchio su uno scarabocchio, del tutto inadatta a uno dei tuoi libri; lasciami perdere, Lenù, non si racconta una cancellatura” (SBP 17) / “And she would conclude: I’m a scribble on a scribble, completely unsuitable for one of your books; forget it, Lenù, one doesn’t tell the story of an erasure.” (SLC 25).

This passage is taken from one of about five chapters in the Quartet that serve somewhat similar structural functions to Fielding’s introductory chapters, except that rather than being discursive, they serve as not-so-covert invocations of the muse. I would like to take a close look

¹⁷⁶ An assertion which we are likely to contradict in the following pages.
at these chapters, in an effort to understand some aspects—two, in particular—of the relationship between Elena and Lila, aspects that Cusk touches upon when writing of “Elena’s lifelong fear—that Lila, while having made no mark on the world, is in fact more brilliant than she is,” as well as when she describes Lila as the “unwritten, unexpressed female potentiality, a more obstinate version of Virginia Woolf’s concept of Shakespeare’s sister.” We must ask: is this female potentiality the titular brilliance that, in Cusk’s evaluation, is at the root of Elena’s feelings of jealousy? How can it be unwritten, on the one hand, if we only know of it because Elena has, in fact, written about it, and, on the other, unexpressed, if time and again Lila’s brilliance is dazzling to others to the point of seeming otherworldly? Lastly: Is Lila correct in asserting that “non si racconta una cancellatura”? How can we tell of an erasure? By doing the sort of reconstructionist or revisionist exercise that Woolf applies when discussing Judith Shakespeare? Would that not, however, turn Lila into a fiction within Elena’s own fiction?

The first of these issues speaks, on a thematic level, of the ambivalent feelings that constitute a friendship; the second strikes at the heart of an ultimately narrative problem. For now, I’d like to set the question of erasure aside, in hopes that it will be answered by our investigation, and instead turn to these chapters that work as an invocation of the muse. They are relevant because they strengthen the undercurrent in the novel that constantly tends to turn Lila into an otherworldly figure (be it witch or patroness), but mostly because they are,  

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177 Lila’s character is a charged site of disparate intertextual references. Not only is she a Mephistophelian figure; in the eyes of the rione (and, at times, Elena), she also wavers between a witch figure (strega) and a patroness (when she is most generous and at the peak of her career). For an interesting study of Maggie Tulliver (a most Lila-like character) as a demonic figure, see Nina Auerbach’s “The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver.” Her eyes, in particular, are continually referred to (in a technique that recalls the epic the same way that references to Immacolata’s limp do), always as “fessure” / “cracks”: “Gli occhi grandi e vivissimi sapevano diventare fessure dietro cui, prima di ogni risposta brillante, c’era uno sguardo che pareva non solo poco infantile, ma forse non umano” (AG 44) / “Her large, bright eyes could become cracks behind which, before every brilliant response, there was a gaze that appeared not very childlike and perhaps not even human” (MBF 48). This particular reference brings Lila closer to
simultaneously, statements of craft that speak of influence, inspiration, *genius*, and, thus, of the genetic makeup of the novel, leading us to issues of entanglement and authorship. They are telling, too, of Elena’s relationship with her friend. I must say I was astonished by, yet surprisingly drawn to, Macsimowicz’s assertion that “one would be hard-pressed to characterize any of Elena and Lila’s interpersonal relationships as intimate, including the one that they share,” mostly because “frequently Elena and Lila withhold intimacy from one another” (211). Have we been deceived by Elena? What exactly is her relationship with Lila, and how much access do we really get to it outside from her restricted perspective?

These vocative chapters might give us some provisional answers. I differentiate them from others that deal with Elena or Lila’s writing in that these refer to the text that we are reading—to Elena’s text about her friendship with Lila—and therefore constitute a form of metafiction within the central conceit of the novel.178

1. *Cancellare le tracce* – Chapter 3. Elena reacts to Lila’s disappearance by telling the story of their lives: “Mi sono sentita molto arrabbiata. Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta, mi sono detta” (*AG* 19) / “I was really angry. We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself” (*MBF* 23). Arguably the inaugural moment of the narrative, at least as far as it provides us with the clearest motivation behind the act of writing, a motivation that is not “friendly” but that instead speaks of manifest rivalry. Elena’s act of writing is marked, from the beginning, by a kind of creative violence: to her friend’s willful erasure of another figure that is only ever indirectly present in the novel: Jo, from *Little Women*. Although Jo is never explicitly mentioned, she is a key intertextual figure: “She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful” (7).

178 Once again, we see a tension in Ferrante between the conventional and the unconventional, as expressed in the highly-aware, metafictional text written by Elena, and the much more orthodox first-person embedding narrative.
traces, she responds with a forceful reinscription of these traces—doubtless a curious subversion, whereby effacement is willful and violence resides in the act of forcing into existence.

2. *Storia del nuovo cognome* – Chapter 84. Elena recognizes how easy it is to tell of her own life, and how difficult to keep up with Lila’s: “Si, è Lila a rendere faticosa la scrittura” (336) / “Yes, it’s Lila who makes writing difficult” (337); “E la sua vita si affaccia di continuo nella mia, nelle parole che ho pronunciato, dentro le quali c’è spesso un’eco delle sue.... Così il racconto dei fatti deve fare i conti con filtri, rimandi, verità parziali, mezze bugie” (337) / “And her life continuously appears in mine, in the words that I’ve uttered, in which there’s often an echo of hers.... Thus the story of the facts has to reckon with filters, deferments, partial truths, half lies” (337). We will return to the first of these statements, though I would like to point out how strongly the figure of entanglement is present in the second quote, which neatly encapsulates the deep-rooted influence that Lila has on her friend, and, more importantly, how this influence is entangled with the act of writing. *Fare i conti*; to come to terms. Thus, the entanglement of their friendship must inevitably spill onto the writing of the text itself, and therefore its structure.

3. *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* – Chapter 27. Lila tells Elena about her time in Bruno Soccavo’s factory. Elena reports the story: “Quel pungolo, oggi che scrivo, mi è ancora più necessario. Voglio che lei ci sia, scrivo per questo. Voglio che cancelli, che aggiunga, che collabori alla nostra storia rovesciandoci dentro, secondo il suo estro, le cose che sa, che ha detto o che ha pensato” (91) / “Today, as I’m writing, that goad is even more essential. I wish she were here, that’s why I’m writing. I want her to erase,
add, collaborate in our story by spilling into it, according to her whim, the things she knows, what she said or thought” (105). Perhaps one of the most explicit invocations in the novel, as well as an alteration or addition to number 1. *Voglio che lei ci sia, scrivo per questo*: a confession that Elena writes to bring Lila back into existence because she wants to work alongside her, because she wants to draw from her genius. The invocation here is more traditional, a form of possession. To collaborate is perhaps the key aspect of the passage, as well as one of the key aspects of the entire novel. The desire for entanglement is, after all, a desire to collaborate; and it is through collaboration that the narrative subverts classical notions of authorship.\(^{179}\) As Fusillo well understands, the friends’ collaboration constitutes a “dissoluzione della nozione classica di autore” (152) / “dissolution of the classical notion of the author” (my translation). On an extradiegetic level, too, the issue of collaboration bears significant weight. Rebecca Falkoff discusses theories behind Ferrante’s identity, in particular her own discomfort faced with the possibility that the novels are the work of a collaboration of writers. She writes: “Am I really so committed to the ideologies of individualism and artistic genius, despite all my Barthesian, Foucauldian, and Benedettian posturing? Why should a work by one author be any more authentic, sincere, or true than a collaboration?” In this last question, Falkoff rephrases one of Ferrante’s chief critiques, executed both in the orchestration of *L’amica geniale* and in the orchestration of her authorial figure. If, as we have observed, the double protagonism of the Quartet destabilizes notions of individualism, Falkoff points to how the possibility of collaborative authorship works toward the same goal.

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\(^{179}\) A desire that is not free from ambivalence. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the textual burnings that bookend the *Storia del nuovo cognome* serve to get rid of the evidence of Lila’s influence in Elena’s writing.
4. *Storia della bambina perduta* – Chapter 2. Elena prepares herself to tell of the most difficult part of their story: “Lei è l’unica che può raccontarlo, se davvero è riuscita a inserirsi in questa catena lunghissima di parole per modificare il mio testo ... per dire di me più di quanto io voglia, più di quanto io sia capace di dire. Auspico questa sua intrusione, me la auguro fin da quando ho cominciato a buttar giù la nostra storia, ma devo arrivare alla fine per sottoporre tutte queste pagine a una verifica” (16) / “Only she can say if, in fact, she has managed to insert herself into this extremely long chain of words to modify my text ... to say of me more than I want, more than I’m able to say. I wish for this intrusion, I’ve hoped for it ever since I began to write our story, but I have to get to the end in order to check all the pages.” (24). In attributing to Lila the capacity to tell her own story more faithfully than she herself is capable of, Elena expresses the sort of relationality central to Cavarero’s thought. This passage, moreover, presents the invocation as an *intrusion*. In other words, Elena wishes for an authorial entanglement that would allow her friend’s genius to permeate her writing. By doing this, she is making explicit a dynamic that governs the entire novel and that prevents any crystallization of authorial notions. As Falotico rightly asks, referring to the influence that *La fata blu* has on Elena’s first novel: “E allora chi è il vero autore? Chi racconta chi?” (“Elena Ferrante” 102-103) / “So who it is the real author then? Who tells the story of whom?” (my translation).

come, io non sia più in grado di distinguere il mio e il suo” (*SBP* 447) / “But I have had to acknowledge that all these pages are mine alone. What Lila often threatened to do—enter my computer—she hasn’t done….Lila is not in these words. There is only what I’ve been able to put down. Unless, by imagining what she would write and how, I am no longer able to distinguish what’s mine and what’s hers” (*SLC* 469). Elena surmises that even if the sort of entanglement as explicit invocation that she has been after has failed, by dint of *desiring* it, and thus imagining it, Lila has become entangled in the text.

If we are to begin at the end, as has been our *modus operandi*, we will inevitably come to the conclusion that Elena’s text is a failure. If passages 2, 3, and 4 speak of a marked tendency toward the prepositional—desire to write with, for, about, and most importantly, *from* Lila—then passage 5 reveals this to have been a futile exercise. And we cannot, of course, ignore that the entire exercise is prompted, as passage 1 demonstrates, by a desire to *spuntarla*—to surpass Lila. We are dealing here with a form of entanglement that cannot be easily, well, untangled, and that is most accessible through our understanding of *frantumaglia* and the figure of the *garbuglio*.

This entanglement is prominently figured (and augured) in the fact that Lila throws Elena’s doll into the cellar and Elena Lila’s. Because this inceptive act is at the root of the entire story, I take this interchange to be a representation of the blurring of identities at play in the novel. We have, therefore, a pairing: “affiatate, una coppia perfetta” (*SFR* 323).\(^{180}\)

But even before the inceptive act, this pairing is foretold, in the very confines of the novel, by that much discussed epigraph:

**IL SIGNORE:** Ma sì, fatti vedere comunque;

non ho mai odiato i tuoi simili, di tutti

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\(^{180}\) To return to DuPlessis, we can see this as a way to rupture the “sequence by inventing a narrative center to express postromantic relations among characters” (48).
The choice of Faust as epigraph to the novel is significant. Franco Moretti famously saw in it a prime example of the symbolic weight that youth carried for modernity and argued, too, that it presented an attempt to synthetize the “contradictory coexistence” of modern Western values—among which “freedom and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphosis” (9).\(^1\)

Having the Mephisto/Faust couple as template raises important issues for Lila and Elena, not least of which is that of origins and authorship if we consider that the author of Faust also penned Wilhelm Meister. Moreover, it grants Lila the role of contradiction: a veritable modern  

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\(^1\) Moretti finds in the Bildungsroman an attempt to resolve this inherent contradiction, worked out through a kind of compromise that is intimately related to the protean and pliant form of the novel (which Faust, of course, is not—Moretti, in fact, does not believe that Goethe’s play successfully reconciles the contradictory values of modern society). He further asks a valuable question regarding one of the seemingly contradictory pairs of modern values: “How can the tendency toward individuality, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination, be made to coexist with the opposing tendency to normality, the offspring, equally inevitable, of the mechanism of socialization?” (16). The answer to this question comes in the process of internalization that the Bildungsroman reenacts, whereby the realization of the individual’s formation seamlessly coincides with the social role that the individual is called to play in society. Thus, Moretti concludes, the historical meaning of the genre can be summarized in the formulation “the comfort of civilization” (16). Regardless of my reservation towards some of Moretti’s assertions—Faust’s striving, for instance, doubtless overshadows any desire for happiness; and the process of legitimation seems somewhat too sanitized and precluding of the tension that drives novels like Great Expectations—I am drawn to his discussion of the seemingly irresolvable values concerning the Bildungsroman. While the heyday of the Bildungsroman sensu stricto is past by almost two centuries, novels of formation continue to, in some way or another, dramatize many of these binaries.
spirit of critique. I would like to stay with this image of contradiction—or, as Greenberg delivers in his translation of Faust, the “spirit of denial” (667)—for it arrives at the core of Lila’s structural role in the Quartet. Thematically, it is in Lila’s contumacious nature that her contradicting role is most evident, every one of her actions an act of defiance: “Ogni divieto davanti a lei perdeva consistenza” (AG 60) / “every prohibition lost substance in her presence” (MBF 64), writes Elena. The novel opens with an act of blatant disobedience to an interdiction orchestrated by Lila, a pattern that will continue throughout her life, in her defiance of her family, in her stubborn refusal to submit to the young Enzo’s abuse, on through her rejection of Michele Solara at fifteen.

About this refusal, it is perhaps one of the more traditional instances in which Lila’s powers of contradiction are thematized in the novel. I say traditional because from the very inception of the modern Western novel, it has been one of the very few prerogatives of female characters to possess the liberty to refuse, specifically in British literature. We find, for instance, that Clarissa Harlowe writes, against her family’s imposition of Mr. Solmes on her: “Why should I be denied the liberty of refusing? That liberty is all I ask” (221). This is, in fact, the central

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182 This incident, in which Lila throws a stone back at Enzo that hits him on the ankle, solidifies the bond between the two friends and further establishes their entanglement in issues of causality, plotting, and colpa. For even though Lila throws the stone, Elena makes it a point to communicate that they both hit him: “lo colpimmo” (AG 30) / “we hit him” (MBF 34), since she “had handed Lila a flat stone with jagged edges” (34). This is one of the many incidences in which Elena becomes an accessory to Lila’s transgressions. It is telling that this event also marks the first time the friends establish physical contact, “un contatto brusco e spaventato” (31) / “an abrupt, frightened contact” (35), which will find a form of multiple frequency when Lila extends her hand over to Lina to ascend the steps to Don Achille’s house. These events have manifold consequences: they establish the bond between the two friends against a backdrop of male violence and patriarchal interdiction, and, perhaps more pertinent to narrative dynamics, they complicate issues of causality (and therefore of plotting) by blurring agency, the ramifications of which we explored in Chapter 2. In the same passage, Elena writes: “mi sono sempre sentita un po’ scollata dalle mie stesse azioni,” / “I always felt slightly detached from my own actions,” whereas Lila possessed “la caratteristica della determinazione assoluta” (30) / “the characteristic of absolute determination” (34). Is this suggestive in Elena of an ingenious impulse to exonerate herself, much like evidenced in Pip? Should we add to the seemingly endless purposes of Lila’s characters that of repository of Elena’s guilt?
drama of about one third of *Clarissa*, as will then be her refusal to marry Lovelace. Her tyrannical brother replies to this question thus: “The liberty of *refusing*, pretty Miss, is denied you, because we are all sensible, that the liberty of *choosing*, to every one’s dislike, must follow” (223). We find that refusal will inevitably entail choice, with the result that for Lila to claim the former is at once to secure the latter, albeit in stark disapproval from those around her, a disapproval that is often reformulated as perverseness. Perhaps the most common insult Clarissa receives from her family is that of being “perverse”: “undutiful and perverse Clarissa” (190); “in that independence upon which she builds all her perverseness” (199); “perverse nature, we know, loves not to be prescribed to” (291). This perverseness is predicated on a sense of independence; Clarissa is perverse, an aberration, because she will not subject to the paternal injunction. When she asks: “Do I contend for any thing more than a mere negative?” (307), she is unwittingly asking for the right to authorship.

This last point is important. We spoke before of the figure of the perverted in *Great Expectations*, contiguous to that of derailment explored in Chapter 2. If we take perverted to mean “turned away,” Clarissa and Lila are perverse because they turn away from the plots imposed on them.\(^{183}\) This perversion is at the very root of the Quartet, and it is, as I have been trying to explain, a generic one, figured as a root become split the moment Lila is denied the opportunity of proceeding with her studies. It is no coincidence that the novel’s central plot is ultimately bifurcated around the issue of education, so important to the classical *Bildungsroman*, and that so much is made of Lila’s decision—perhaps even inability—to leave the confines of the *rione*, juxtaposed to Elena’s early departure from it.\(^{184}\) As Fraiman states, “the hero begins his

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\(^{183}\) A gesture that is physically transposed in the much-debated covers of Ferrante’s novels, which feature women turning their heads away.

\(^{184}\) I am conscious of the fact that one could look at Elena as a figure of perversion as well; her story is marked by an effort to escape the life that seemed to be destined to her. In this sense, she is like most
Bildung by leaving home and going abroad” (6). And all points to Elena living the orthodox version of Bildung—pursuing her studies, achieving social mobility, asserting her place in the world—while Lila seems trapped within more orthodox conceptions of femininity, such as staying at home, marrying at a young age, going through the process of courtship. Gambaro writes of the importance of the work’s genre; on the one hand, there is “il diagramma lineare della Bildung, rappresentata dall’ordinato percorso di Elena attraverso le tappe di un’ascesa sociale faticosamente raggiunta,” and, on the other, “le vicende buie di Lila, la sua napoletanità allucinata e feroce” (“Splendori” 159) / “the linear path of the Bildung, represented by Elena’s orderly trajectory through the stages of a hard-earned social ascent [and, on the other] Lila’s obscure affairs, her dazzling and ferocious napoletanità” (my translation). Of course, matters do not stand as simply as this. We cannot take Lila and Elena’s plots to be mere counterpoints illustrative of opposite ways of entering and being in the world. Or is Lila’s story simply the dramatization of a character’s inability to make itself at home in the Bildungsroman mode? 

protagonists. Nancy Armstrong writes: “Edward Waverley is a misfit. In this respect, he harks back to Robinson Crusoe and anticipates any number of later protagonists who cannot inhabit the social position into which they have been born” (349). We can say, then, that perversion is inscribed into the DNA of the novel. This chapter will elaborate on this.

185 de Rogatis remarks on the fraught relationship that Elena has with Italian, which she learned in a formal context, while Lila’s relationship to language is void of such tensions because she escaped indoctrination. Lila’s Italian “non è animato da alcuna vergogna delle origini ... e ... rimarrà sempre estraneo al disciplinamento della scuola borghese” (Parole 2826) / “is not fueled by any shame of origins... and... will always remain removed from the disciplinary practices of bourgeois schooling” (my translation); Elena’s university education, on the other hand, is a “costante imitazione delle parole e delle posture maschili” (Parole 2923) / “constant imitation of male words and postures” (my translation). 

186 Donnaruma seems to suggest that Lila’s disappearance is the result of a failure to make oneself at home in the world of the novel: “Lila è sempre un personaggio fuori posto, tanto quanto Elena è ossessionata dal desiderio di trovare una sua collocazione nel mondo e stare fra quelli che sanno come si vive.... Per questa sua inadattabilita...il destino di Lila è sparire” (143) / “Lila is always a character that is out of place, as much as Elena is fixated with the desire to find her place in the world and be among those who know how to live....Because of this unadaptability of hers...Lila’s destiny is to disappear” (my translation).
Were this a nineteenth-century novel, this might be the case, and Lila could have made herself at home with countless other suicidal, exiled, or murdered female characters unable to escape their literary destiny because of their unviability. But something else seems to be at work, something that has to do with the shared protagonism of the novel, with the sort of potency that Lila’s character exudes and that has led critics like Cusk to see in her female genius personified (and Ferrante herself to suggest that the novel is a failed exercise because only Lila has the capacity to tell the story). Elena recognizes the rift in the story of her friendship with Lila, and she even engages in recreative scenarios of what their lives would have been like if both had followed similar paths in life:

finivo a volte per immaginarmi che cosa sarebbe stata la mia vita e quella di Lila se avessimo fatto entrambe l’esame di ammissione alla scuola media e poi il liceo e poi tutti gli studi fino alla laurea, gomito a gomito, affiatate, una coppia perfetta che somma energie intellettuali, piaceri della comprensione e dell’immaginazione. Avremmo scritto insieme, avremmo firmato insieme, avremmo tratto potenza l’una dall’altra. (SFR 323) I sometimes imagined what my life and Lila’s would have been if we had both taken the test for admission to middle school and then high school, if together we had studied to get our degree, elbow to elbow, allied, a perfect couple, the sum of intellectual energies, of

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187 And maybe Tina would have found a place among the innumerable changelings that populate eighteenth and nineteenth century novels?
188 “Ma, come faccio di solito, volevo anche raccontarla in modo che la voce narrante palesemente si tacesse una parte del racconto, come se non riuscisse a portarlo fino in fondo o come se le sue pagine fossero la brutta copia di una storia che non riuscirà mai ad arrivare in bella perché è l’altra, colei che non racconta ma è raccontata, ad avere la potenza per portarla pienamente a compimento” (300) / “But, as I usually do, I also wanted to tell it in a way so that the narrative voice is openly silent about a part of the story, as if she couldn’t complete it, or as if its pages were the rough draft of a story that will never achieve a finished version, because it’s the other, she who doesn’t describe but is described, who has the power to bring it fully to the end” (310-311). We must return to this statement, for it seems to me extremely important.
the pleasures of understanding and the imagination. We would have written together, we would have been authors together, we would have drawn power from each other. (TLS 354)

The desire for a common story is always contiguous to the desire for coauthorship. It’s worth noting that Elena’s desire to sign with Lila is accompanied by a desire to draw potency from each other. Lila’s potency is linked to the liberty of refusing which we have discussed, and this liberty, extending beyond the thematic prerogative to, among other things, refuse someone like Michele Solara as suitor, is structurally underlined by her Mephistophelian role in the novel.

By Mephistophelian I do not mean diabolic, at least not in the narrow sense of the term that connotes evil, but rather as representing what Goethe deemed the Geistern die verneinen (the spirits of denial, or contradiction—spirits who say no), charged with waking humans from our much-too-loved rest and propelling us into action—the foundation for the human striving that “ungebändigt immer vorwärts dringt” (61) / “presses ever forward unsubdued” (64). I am not so much concerned with Goethe’s Faust itself, nor with its incorporation into the European canon or its oscillating reception across time; instead, I want to bring this discussion to bear on the boundlessness that Mephistopheles represents and inspires in Faust, for it is relevant to our understanding of Lila’s influence over Elena and may even provide us with additional insight into the ways in which Lila drives the plot onward and, simultaneously, transgresses its bounds. This is evident in two kinds of moments; when Elena feels “goaded” by Lila’s accomplishments

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189 As W. Daniel Wilson writes in his introduction to Martin Greenberg’s translation of Faust, the 1790 version of the play “fed the early romantic writers’ conviction that Goethe was their leading light: after all, Faust’s sustaining principle is striving, a very romantic boundlessness with a focus on process rather than goal.” It seems to me that the kind of restless, secular knowledge propounded by Goethe’s version of the legend is representative of the very “modernity” that is inscribed in the genetic makeup of the novel, and which we have elsewhere discussed. Not for nothing Moretti found in Faust a representative of modernity, even if the text is not a novel.
into a feeling of competitiveness that pushes her forward (Lila learning Greek before Elena does, for instance), and in the moments in which Elena consciously invokes the image of her friend to help her carry on with her literary labor. Needless to say, both are closely linked. The very act that prompts Elena to begin writing her text is the desire to *spuntarla*, while the only reason she begins writing *Un’amicizia* is the fear that Lila has been writing a text that will prove to be better than any of hers. We can reconfigure this rivalry, in an effort to incorporate our discussion of desire into the Quartet, as a manifestation of Girard’s triangular geometry: that is, Elena only desires to write because she assumes that this is Lila’s intention. Adopting a triangular model

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190 In a way, this subordinates Lila’s character to Elena’s: “Tirava fuori da sé pensieri, scarpe, parole scritte e oralì, piani complicati, furie e invenzioni, solo per mostrare a me qualcosa di se stessa?” (*SNC* 143) “She drew out of herself thoughts, shoes, words written and spoken, complicated plans, rages and inventions, only to show me something of herself?” (*SNN* 143-44).

191 Although I intend to return to this point, I would like to refer to an observation Ferrante made in *La frantumaglia* on writing as an act of pride (an observation that Elena herself repeats in Chapter 52 of the last *storia*). I think it is highly informative of Elena’s presumption in writing her friend’s story:

   Scrivere è un atto di superbia.... Comunque io la metta, resta sempre il fatto che mi sono arrogata il diritto di imprigionare gli altri dentro ciò che a me pare di vedere, sentire, pensare, immaginare, sapere. È un compito? È una missione? È una vocazione? Chi mi ha chiamata, chi mi ha assegnato quel compito e quella missione? .... Non ho mai scritto per guadagnarmi da vivere. Scrivo per testimoniare che sono vissuta e che ho cercato una misura per me e per gli altri, visto che gli altri non potevano o non sapevano o non volevano farlo. Bene, questo cos’è se non superbia? (369-70)

Writing is an act of pride…. However I state it, the fact remains that I have assumed the right to imprison others in what I seem to see, feel, think, imagine, and know. Is it a task? A mission? A vocation? Who called on me, who assigned me that task and that mission? …. I’ve never written to earn a living. I write to bear witness to the fact that I have lived and have sought a means of measuring myself and others, since those others couldn’t or didn’t know how or didn’t want to do it. What is this if not pride? (380).

Whereas some might see Elena’s choice to tell Lila’s story as a recuperative act in line with Woolf’s reconstruction of Judith Shakespeare’s life, or, at any event, as a service that Elena provides to her friend, I am more inclined to see this act of writing as a violation of an interdiction explicitly made by Lila (a point I have noted elsewhere), and therefore as a betrayal of sorts that establishes writing as a retributive act. The issue of *colpa* continues to creep in on us, suggesting the sinister potentialities of writing as a tool to place blame or exact vengeance. Elena *si arroga* (she arrogates to herself; Goldstein’s translation as “assumes” foregoes the illegitimacy of the claim that is implied in the verb “to arrogate”) the right to write about her friend, but this is an act of pride—an act of arrogance, not coincidentally a cognate of *arrogate*.

192 Stephanie Love proposes a similar triadic model: “By conceptualizing the constitution of subjectivity in triadic (self, other, and Third) instead of dyadic (self and other) terms,” she writes, “we can understand the importance of social context for the emergence of a sense of self” (“An Educated Identity” 89).
allows us to move beyond the more common dual model that critics tend to apply to the novel. In fact, some of the Quartet’s most fascinating moment reenact the slippage from mediation into double mediation. Girard writes: “Dans la médiation double, la métamorphose de l’objet est commune aux deux partenaires. On peut y voir le fruit d’une bizarre collaboration négative,” so that, “on ne désire pas tant l’objet qu’on ne redoute de le voir possédé par autrui” (106, 107) / “In double mediation the metamorphosis of the object is common to both partners. We can see in it the fruit of a strange negative collaboration” [so that] “one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else’s hands” (101, 102). In this sense, the example provided above (Lila learning Greek before Elena does) is not only an example of how Lila goads Elena in her educational pursuits, but of the less obvious ways in which Elena herself exerts a Mephistophelian role over Lila (because Elena is the narrator, these moments are considerably fewer). This poses intriguing problems, for if the object coveted in the triangularity of desire is intangible—i.e. knowledge—then both the desiring subject and the mediator can possess it, and therefore must change it. Already a clean Mephisto-Faust parallel is problematized, for Mephistopheles remains an otherworldly figure, somewhat representative of Girard’s external mediator—yet uncomfortably so, for he is closer to being an instrument to Faust’s desire rather than a mediator in his influence.

Lila, nevertheless, remains an indisputable influence on the text, even if, as Elena suggests, she never truly inhabits the text. Much like Mephistopheles’s arrival into Faust’s house is what truly initiates the plot of the play and his presence is what allows for its continuation,
Lila remains a necessary structural presence, even in—or perhaps especially evidenced by—the sections where she is not present, such as Elena’s two years in Pisa, done away with in a very short chapter, and thus evincing the necessity of Lila’s presence to launch the plot and make the story robust. It is in the chapter in which Elena reflects how easily she tells of her years in Pisa and how strenuous it is to write about Lila’s life that she utters one of the novel’s more important statements, quoted above: “Si, è Lila a rendere faticosa la scrittura.” This is a significant realization. Writing needs to be difficult if it is to be plotted; in order to be excited into narrativity, it must be strenuous, perverted. As intimated earlier, we are forced to acknowledge that plot contains its own subversion within itself, and that what Chapter 2 had suggested was a neat distinction between the forward-looking qualities of plot and the sideward or diagonal elements of disruptors of plot is not as clear cut as we had suspected. Must we then agree with Brooks that plot is inherently a state of deviance?

In order to arrive at a possible answer to this question, we must return to Elena’s statement. If writing must be faticosa, can we understand this strain in light of the principal driving force behind Faust: streben? “Es irrt der Mensch, so lang’ er strebt” (18) / “While still man strives, still he must err” (13), says the Lord in the Preface, not only foreshadowing Faust’s deviance but, simultaneously, exonerating him preemptively by providing an ontological reason for straying from the intended path. As is well known, Goethe borrowed the Preface from the Book of Job, in which God allows Satan to beset Job’s life with tragedy in order to test his faith. I go back to the religious roots of L’amica geniale’s epigraph neither because I believe there is a moral behind Ferrante’s novel, nor because I necessarily think that, like Goethe’s Faust, the

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193 As we have discussed, this is expressed in passages duration: specifically, in the imbalance between the very short discourse time and the long narrative time.

194 Once again, colpa.
novel is trying to vindicate a set of Enlightenment ideals, but rather because I suspect that there
is something in both the Book of Job and in Faust which speaks of human striving as inherently
non-linear and, furthermore, that this knowledge is often expressed in the narrative impulse. We
can speak of a narrative theodicy, whereby the deviant and the perverse are not accidental to plot
but inscribed in it, necessary elements to bring plot, as Brooks would have it, out of quiescence,
or at the very least implicit and inevitable in its trajectory.\(^{195}\) In the “godless” world of the novel,
this theodicy has nothing to do with divine authorship: “if there is a divine masterplot for human
existence, it is radically unknowable. In the absence or silence of divine masterplots, the
organization and interpretation of human plots remains as necessary as it is problematic” (Brooks
141).

The theodicy, moreover, does not have to do with literary authorship, for it does not
reflect a biographical will behind the page. Instead, it speaks of an erring as perversion (Es irrt
der der Mensch) implicit in the narrative impulse at the root of the plotting activity, an activity that
must ever keep moving—striving—if it is to continue being a story (so lang er strebt).\(^{196}\) This
streben must necessarily be, as it were, alighted—to return to our metabolic model, it needs the
energy released by the catabolic functions of a text. Hence the Mephistophelian figure, especially
in its structural role as explained in the epigraph to L’amica geniale. “Fare la parte del diavolo,”

\(^{195}\) There seems to be an intimate relationship between struggle and plotting, as evidenced in one of
literature’s arch-plotters, Lovelace: “Difficulty is a stimulus with such a spirit as mine” (866).
\(^{196}\) Brooks brings Faust into his discussion of plot by alluding to Freud’s deconstruction of “the illusion of
a human drive toward perfection, an impulsion forward and upward: a force that—this is where he quotes
Faust as the classic text of man’s striving—‘presses ever forward unsubdued’” (105). I should clarify that
I see striving not necessarily as an “instinct toward perfection,” but, to go back to our metabolic model, as
the source of the energies populating a text, as that which drives a plot onward, and therefore closer to the
catabolic functions of a text. Scheherazade is the archetype of this process; she must continue to postpone,
to deviate (digress), if her story and her life are to be continued.
to play the devil’s part,\textsuperscript{197} becomes one and the same with providing that \textit{pungolo} that is so important for Elena to continue writing: “Quel pungolo, oggi che scrivo, mi è ancora più necessario” (\textit{SFR} 91). Understanding the mechanics of Lila’s Mephistophelian influence on the narration strengthens our comprehension of the metabolic malfunction of the \textit{Storia del cattivo sangue} as discussed in Chapter 1. Because Lila becomes even more unattainable, the narration itself suffers from it, having lost its main source of energy. Before that, Lila keeps the narration alive, as Elena recognizes at one point: “Devi sempre sobillare, urtare, pungolare” (\textit{SBP} 397) / “You always have to incite, shove, poke” (\textit{SLC} 417). Does this somehow reconfigure the act of plotting as a necessary \textit{Teufelspakt}? The Faustian framework does seem to reposition the plotting activity as an inevitable engagement with the forces of perversion or deviance.

On a different level, too, and in a nod to more Romantic conceptions of \textit{genius}, Lila serves not only as impulse, but as muse or inspiration for Elena, principally in the recurring vocative chapters. The evolution of the term \textit{genius} is too complicated to venture into at the moment, but it is important to note that Lila is constantly aligned with the mysterious figure of the quasi-preternatural genius, whereas Elena’s skill is perhaps best defined by the classical \textit{ingenium}. Hence the constant reference to the “qualcosa di tremendo” (\textit{SFR} 188) / “something tremendous” (\textit{TLS} 210) present in Lila; hence, too, the stress on Lila’s lack of formal education and her unbridled, uncontrollable sense of genius and creativity. That the novel undermines Romantic conceptions of genius is made obvious by the non-solitary, female, and othered narration; namely, by the fact that the force behind the artistic creation does not find its source

\textsuperscript{197} The line, in the original, reads: “Drum geb’ ich gern ihm den Gesellen zu, / Der reizt und \textit{wirkt and muss als Teufel schaffen}” (18 emphasis mine).
either in an entirely external, otherworldly being, or in a mysterious presence emanating from within the author. Nadia Setti raises important points:

Genio, generazione, genesi, genealogia, genere: tutte queste parole hanno la stessa radice indo-europea “gen,” genus, la specie e la sua (ri)produzione. L’amica geniale sarebbe in tal senso un’originale traduzione del genio attraverso la sua femminilizzazione e duplicazione (duplicità, ambivalenza) che mette in gioco l’unità assoluta del genio ma anche la grammatica del genere linguistico. (113-14)

Genius, generation, genesis, genealogy, genre/gender: all these words share the same Indo-European root “gen,” genus, the species and its (re)production. L’amica geniale, then, translates genius in an original way by making it female and double (doubleness, ambivalence), and thus putting at stake its absolute unity, as well as the grammar of the linguistic genre. (my translation)

What we have in L’amica geniale is a curious blend in which the genius or muse is internal to the narration but external to the narrator, displaced, as it were. Girard aids us to appreciate how the internal positionality of the mediator (Lila) affects the narration; namely, by allowing for the feelings we have discussed—envy, prominently—to alter the course of the narration, thus giving way to a particularly interesting narrative dialectic.

Or perhaps we would do better to speak not of a narrative dialectic but, as we have been doing, of narrative entanglement. Elena’s desire that Lila will insert herself in her text is an invocation that simultaneously operates as a desire to be entangled with her in order to draw from her genius. Regardless of the success of this insertion, the entanglement is made evident from the moment Elena turns Lila into narrative material, as well as from the moment when she uses her friend to construct her own sense of identity and her desires. In fact, the very
The mark of prepositionality that we identified in Pip’s rhapsody should be more than evident here. In the words…In a particular gesture…In my less…. It seems to me, however, that *L’amica geniale* makes explicit this influence in a way that *Great Expectations* does not, or at least it highlights how this influence affects the writing process itself. With the added distinction (an important one), that the dialectics of the Lila-Elena relationship is constantly reconfigured by the desires of *both*. 
prepositionality of her relationship with Lila, and recognizing the flawed nature of her writing, Elena recognizes the entanglement that destabilizes any notion of linearity.

She recognizes, too, the relational nature of identity, a concept that Adriana Cavarero has discussed at length. In *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Cavarero writes of “quel carattere di intreccio con le storie altrui che costituisce la realtà espositiva e relazionale del sé” (107) / “the interwoven character of others’ stories, which constitutes the expositive and relational reality of the self” (82). Note that the articulation of this exposure (*intreccio*/interwoven) keeps in line with our conceptions of entanglement. This expositive quality signals to that state by which we are all, as Paul A. Kottman words it in his introduction to Cavarero’s text, “exposed from birth within the interactive scene of the world” (ix). Because we are exposed, we are also narratable, Cavarero argues, and indeed can only exist in relation to others. Every existent’s uniqueness, by dint of being “radicata nel flusso impadroneggiable di una costitutiva esposizione” (187) / “rooted in the unmasterable flux of a constitutive exposition” (144), is narratable only by others, is ultimately the expression of “una vita che solo gli altri possono raccontare” (86) / “a life whose story only others can recount” (63). For Cavarero, the self desires to have their story told by another. This is an interesting point, given both Elena’s and Lila’s respective reactions to other writing about their lives. Contrary to Cavarero’s argument, Lila forbids Elena to write about her, while Elena, upon reading Lila’s notebooks, feels utterly violated. This question aside, Cavarero’s observations highlight one of the most significant blind spots of the classical autobiography (its supposition of an isolate self) and, in doing so, establishes the necessity of “un

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199 In an interview, Elissa Schappell asked Ferrante what nonfiction had most influenced her, to which she responded: “Il manifesto di Donna Haraway che ho letto con colpevole ritardo, e un vecchio libro di Adriana Cavarero: Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti” (La frantumaglia 326) / “The manifesto of Donna Haraway, which I am guilty of having read quite late, and an old book by Adriana Cavarero (Relative Narratives; Storytelling and Selfhood)” (330).
“tu che sia veramente un altro, un’altra” (120) / “a you that is truly an other” (92). The mirage of individual Bildung as perceived by the self is exposed in L’amica geniale by the presence of Lila, and perhaps we find in Elena’s incessant wish for her intrusion a covert desire to have Lila tell the story of her life.

Of course, most novels make evident the relational and expositive character of identity simply by having other characters interact with the protagonist; nonetheless, the Quartet places this relationality centerstage as a means to undermine the arbitrariness of protagonism—the conception that an individual can be entirely self-constructed, or at the very least substantially removed from others. From Cavarero’s study arises a deep-seated belief in the power of narration to arrive at the who behind every existent being—as opposed to the what with which philosophy concerns itself. Kottman writes: “In the context of their narrative relation, neither ‘narratable self’ is reducible to an essence…. Cavarero insists that the self is narratable and not narrated. It is an existence that has not been reduced to an essence, a ‘who’ that has not been distilled into the ‘what’” (xii). In this light, we can approach the necessary unfixity of Lila’s character, for we never truly get a sense that she is fully narrated; in being so she would have become imprisoned in the writing, explained away. Lila, as Mephisto, cannot be contained.

Another aspect of Lila’s Mephistophelian role that I would like to highlight is closely aligned with Mephisto’s role as der Geist der stets verneint. As a destabilizing figure, Lila provides the text with its biggest source of irony. Milan Kundera writes of irony in L’art du roman as one of the most important components of the novelistic genre and its source of ambiguity:

IRONIE. … Emma Bovary est-elle insupportable ? Ou courageuse et touchante ? … Plus attentivement on lit le roman, plus la réponse devient impossible car, par définition, le roman
est l’art ironique : sa « vérité » est cachée, non prononcée, non-prononçable….L’ironie irritée…. parce qu’elle nous prive des certitudes en dévoilant le monde : comme ambiguïté.

(1569-1576)

Irony. Which is right and which is wrong? Is Emma Bovary intolerable? … The more attentively we read a novel, the more impossible the answer, because the novel is, by definition, the ironic art: its “truth” is concealed, undeclared, undeclarable…. Irony irritates….because it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity. (134)

If irony is what rids the world of certitudes, it does it, Kundera argues, through context. He writes, in a separate essay: “L’ironie veut dire: aucune des affirmations qu’on trouve dans un roman ne peut être prise isolément, chacune d’elles se trouve dans un confrontation complexe et contradictoire avec d’autres affirmations, d’autres situations, d’autres gestes, d’autres idées, d’autres événements” (Testaments 24) / “Irony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events” (203).

Time and again, we find Lila deconstructing Elena’s assertions simply by providing a context for them. In the second volume, for instance, she shares with Elena her anxieties about the meaninglessness of pregnancy. Seeing, however, how quickly Lila gets used to playing with the daughters of the cartolaia, Elena, somewhat self-congratulatorily, thinks: “Ecco come diventerà, pensai guardandola. Ciò che prima le sembrava insopportabile, ora già la rallegra. Forse dovrei dirle che le cose prive di senso sono quelle più belle. È una buona frase, le piacerà” (SNC 113) / “she’ll become that, I thought, looking at her. What seemed insupportable before is cheering her up now. Maybe I should tell her that things without meaning are the most beautiful ones. It’s a good sentence, she’ll like it” (SNN 113). Hard to miss how, by pure
contextualization, this moment trivializes Elena’s seemingly profound *trouvaille*; I find it to be extremely novelistic in the Kunderian sense of the term. This assertion becomes clearer by comparing it to the end of Chapter 1 of *La figlia oscura*, in which Leda states that “le cose più difficili da raccontare sono quelle che noi stessi non riusciamo a capire” (8) / “the most difficult things to tell are those which we ourselves can’t understand” (10). What is delivered in the latter as an indisputable dictum is transformed in the former, through contextualization, into the expression of a desire to impress the other and to congratulate oneself upon arriving at a knowledge that borders on the hackneyed. Perhaps I abuse of the text; Ferrante has gone as far as asserting that Leda’s words are “il motto – posso chiamarlo così? – che è alla base di tutti i miei libri” (258) / “It’s the motto—can I call it that?—which is at the root of all my books” (267). Yet we cannot ignore how trivialized the motto is rendered in *L’amica geniale.*

In this moment, Lila contextualizes or ironizes indirectly. At other points in the novels, she does so directly, as when she pokes fun at her friend’s speech upon receiving an award: “La distesa bianca della luna, ironizzò, certe volte è meglio stare zitti che dire stronzate. E aggiunse che la luna era un sasso tra miliardi d’altri sassi e che, sasso per sasso, la cosa migliore era stare coi piedi ben piantati dentro i guai della terra” (*SFR* 211) / “The white expanse of the moon, she...

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200 A similar moment is present in the third volume, when, on tour for her book, Elena explains to her audience the reason behind the sexual passages in her novel: “Solo alla fine parlii della necessità di raccontare in modo franco ogni esperienza umana, anche – sottolineai – ciò che pare impronunciabile e che perciò taciamo persino a noi stesse. Quelle ultime parole piacquero nella testa quei pochi concetti, che diventarono presto un ritornello. Li usai spesso in pubblico, ora in modo divertito, ora con tono drammatico, ora sinteticamente, ora sviluppandoli con elaborati ghirigori verbali” (*SFR* 65) / “Finally, I spoke of the necessity of recounting frankly every human experience, including—I said emphatically—what seems unsayable and what we do not speak of even to ourselves. They liked those last words, I regained respect. The professor who had invited me praised them, she said she would reflect on them, she would write to me. Her approval established in my mind those few concepts, which soon became a refrain. I used them often in public, sometimes in an amusing way, sometimes in a dramatic tone, sometimes succinctly, sometimes developing them with elaborate verbal flourishes.” (*TLS* 64-65). Once again, the contextualization of these dicta shows us how they are mostly performative and rhetorical.
said ironically, sometimes it’s better to say nothing than to talk nonsense. And she added that the moon was a rock among billions of other rocks, and that, as far as rocks go, the best thing was to stand with your feet planted firmly in the troubles of the earth” (*TLS* 234). More than any other, this passage highlights the *disenchanting* presence of Lila in the narration. As Chapter 2 suggested, Lila seems to be most attuned to the meaninglessness of existence, and it is because of her that the novel escapes some of the dangerous paths of the first-person narration. I see another interesting comparison with one of Ferrante’s early novels in the moment when Lila ironizes about Elena’s writing: “Diceva divertita: il senso è quel filo a segmenti neri come la merda di un insetto?” (*SBP* 411) / “She said mockingly: Is the meaning that line of black markings that look like insect shit?” (*SLC* 431). That thread is itself a figure for plotting and sense making, we have already established, yet Lila’s assertion belittles it by highlighting how invested Elena is in the activity. Olga, in *I giorni dell’abbandono*, observes the ants that have invaded her house and writes: “Correvano in fila lungo la base della libreria, erano tornate ad assediare la casa, forse erano l’unico filo nero che la teneva ancora insieme, che le impediva di disintegrarsi del tutto” (140) / “They ran in a line along the base of the bookcase, they had returned to besiege the house, perhaps they were the only black thread that held it together, that kept it from disintegrating completely” (126). The immediacy of Olga’s predicament, which renders

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201 Kundera places the birth of the novel alongside the *dédivinisation/Entgotterung* of the world: “Quand Dieu quittait lentement la place d’où il avait dirigé l’univers et son ordre de valeurs, séparé le Bien et le Mal et donné un sens à chaque chose, Don Quichotte sortit de sa maison et il ne fut plus en mesure de reconnaître le monde. Celui-ci, en l’absence du Juge suprême, apparut subitement dans une redoutable ambiguïté ; l’unique Vérité divine se décomposa en centaines de vérités relatives que que les hommes se partagèrent. Ainsi le monde des Temps modernes naquit et le roman, son image et modèle, avec lui” (*L’art du roman* 49-53) / “As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world” (6).
everything around her urgent and serious, is turned in *L’amica geniale* into a severely ironic statement.

Do I mean by this to suggest that *L’amica geniale* is more of a novel than *La figlia oscura* or *I giorni dell’abbandono*? Not necessarily, but simply that in its breadth and, most importantly, shared protagonism, it can communicate the ambiguity and irony that critics like Kundera argue are so important to the novelistic genre.\(^2\) This irony is closely linked but also revealingly at odds with the sense-making tendency of the plotting activity. It is one of the Quartet’s strengths to be able to reveal both: the constructive side in Elena’s writing, the destructive in Lila’s presence. Though working within psychoanalytic parameters, Van Ness arrives at a similar conclusion: “Lila’s unsettling encounters with this oceanic feeling, this undoing of signification, are diametrically opposed to Elena Greco’s (and Elena Ferrante’s) attempt to create order, language, and text. They are the dialectical poles of the semiotic and symbolic, meaning and word, destruction and creation, defiance and representation” (308). This tension is manifest even in Lila herself, if we look closely. At one point, Elena writes about her friend: “pareva in grado di dare a ogni monumento, a ogni ciottolo, una densità di significato” (SBP 424) / “seemed able to give to every monument, every stone, a density of meaning” (SLC 445), only to, four short chapters later, contradict herself by stating: “Ah come sapeva usare le parole, quando voleva. Sembrava custodire un suo senso segreto che toglieva senso a tutto” (SBP 434) / “Ah, how she could use words when she wanted to. She seemed to safeguard a secret

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\(^2\) Although I take Lila’s Mephistophelic role to work on an entirely different level, the Quartet’s orchestra of characters also works towards depotentializing Elena’s voice (and, as such, her authority). Porciani writes of the “effetto di controcanto” (counter melody effect) that increases our suspicion of Elena (176); Gambaro refers to the “impianto corale” (choral structure) and the “narrazione plurivoca” (polysemic narration) that contributes to the narration’s unreliability (“Splendori” 164); de Rogatis also speaks of a choral narration whereby “si dà infatti riconoscimento delle identità se non attraverso un conflitto vissuto in un contesto sociale” (“Elena Ferrante” 293) / “identities are recognized through a conflict lived in a social context” (my translation).
meaning that took meaning away from everything else” (SLC 455). How can Lila be
simultaneously the purveyor of sense and its destroyer? The answer is once again in her role as
prime ironizer. While we are told that Lila possesses the genius capable to create that Elena
herself does not, her role as der Geist der stets verneint allows her to contradict most of the
knowledge that Elena arrives at in her narration. The savoir we discussed in Chapter 1 can never
be stable, not while Lila inhabits the narration, and any “comfortable centrality” that might have
been conveyed by Elena’s protagonist (and with it, of her Bildung) is destabilized by Lila. This
process is accompanied by a refusal to allow for any fixity of meaning at large—a tendency to
relativize by contextualization.

I borrow the formulation “comfortable centrality” from Fraiman’s fascinating discussion
of The Mill on the Floss: “But though Maggie may be the more conspicuous protagonist, it is
equally true that any comfortable centrality is thrown off by Tom. Her narrative deposes but does
not, however, wholly displaces his” (129). A very similar dynamic is at work in Lila and Elena’s
bond; it plays out on the diegetic as well as in the generic field, except that, contrary to The Mill
on the Floss, where the generic tension that Fraiman identifies is ultimately a question of gender
(the protagonism of the novel shared and eventually cancelled out by brother and sister), L’amica
geniale presents diverse feminine ways of being in the world, one of which advances along the
path of male Bildung, the other, mysterious, genius, obstinate, making its own. “If,” Fraiman
writes, “Tom indicates the work’s nominal status as Bildungsroman, Maggie’s problem—and the
problematic of the novel—is her inability to enter the designated mode” (130). But Maggie’s
problematic is simply one half of L’amica geniale. Or rather, in Elena’s plot are scripted both the
successful path of Tom’s Bildung and the tensions present in Maggie’s plot. The other half of the
novel reminds us that something altogether different is at work in the narrative, a form in which plotting is not relegated to writing, but can itself be inscribed in the self, in the body.

“Non si racconta una cancellatura,” says Lila. Perhaps she is right, an erasure cannot be told; it must be lived. The Quartet presents a figure of erasure that is not experienced as failure or defeat, but as victory, or, as Miller would have it, as an italicization. Even if Elena does not, the novel’s end vindicates Lila’s poetics of rupture over (or italicized as) a poetics of creation, as a radical act of self-assertion and a pointed critique of imposed plots, social or generic. L’amica geniale seems too wary of self-advancement and mobility, be they female or male, to be squarely classified as a Bildungsroman, but at the same time it seems much too concerned with these issues not to be classified as a one. This is one of the tensions that we have been parsing out throughout these pages and the reason why a meaningful examination of Great Expectations is beneficial to this project, that is, to estimate how much Ferrante conserves in her invocation of nineteenth century forms. Ultimately, I suspect that fixating on the imposition of a single generic label works actively against the specificity of any work, so that trying to distinguish male from female plots vis-à-vis the novel of formation becomes a futile, and perhaps counterproductive, effort. A possible corrective to an overreliance on the label of Bildungsroman might take the shape of an examination of other generic registers that collide in the Quartet.

For example, beyond discussions of the Bildungsroman, many critics have underscored Ferrante’s debt to the feuilleton and, in particular, the melodrama. Unsurprisingly, such statements usually come in the way of negative criticism or as a means to belittle the Quartet, and often the charge of sentimentality is accompanied by a mention of the novel’s strong reliance on plot. These accusations tend to be enmeshed with the issue of gender; Falkoff writes, about those who speculate heavily about Ferrante’s biographical identity, that “some who dismiss her
writing as plot-driven and sentimental seem to accept that she is a woman.”

Taking aside the fact that a strong reliance on plot is far from a being sign of literary demerit, the Quartet’s undeniable dependence on popular literature has been interpreted as a sign of Ferrante’s creative intelligence by more open-minded critics, prominent among whom Raffaele Donnarumma, who has written on the ways in which Ferrante invokes the melodrama to then sabotage it. This, of course, returns us to our discussion of Fielding’s preface to *Tom Jones* and the inevitable broken pact between author and reader.

Donnarumma begins his article thus: “Inutile girarci intorno: *L’amica geniale* è un grande melodramma – o, se si preferisce, un grande *feuilleton*. Stanno in questo molte ragioni sia del suo successo di pubblico, sia dello sfavore con cui l’ha giudicato una parte dell’accademia, soprattutto italiana” (138) / “Useless to beat around the bush: *L’amica geniale* is a great melodramma—or, if you prefer, a great *feuilleton*. Here lie many of the reasons for its success with the public and for the harsh criticism directed at it by some academics, mostly Italian” (my translation). Many of the narrative devices employed by the novel, he argues, not only draw from the extensive well that is nineteenth century serial literature, but, closer to our times, from the “*telenovelas* più imbarazzanti” (from the most embarrassing *telenovelas*) (138). Interestingly, Donnarumma speaks of a “traducibilità” that characterizes works like *L’amica geniale* “in cui scrittura letteraria, cinema, televisione si confondono, si parlano, si scambiano le parti” (138) / “in which literary writing, cinema, and television blend and speak with one another and

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Donnarumma is right in pointing out that “in [Ferrante] il melodramma può diventare l’alleato del realismo, perché porta nella vita quotidiana una gravità di cui sarebbe altrimenti priva; e così, è promosso a forma propria di un intero mondo della vita. Ma come modo romanesco di serie B, esso sembra la figura di una scrittura e di una condizione femminile che ancora oggi, soprattutto nel nostro paese, fatica a trovare il proprio riconoscimento” (144). “in Ferrante, melodrama can become the ally of realism because it gives daily life a seriousness that it would otherwise lack; hence its promotion to being the form proper to an entire world. But as a second rate novelistic mode, it appears as the figure of a writing and a female condition that, even today, especially in our country, struggles to find recognition” (my translation).
exchange their parts” (my translation). That de Rogatis finds the same quality in the Quartet, albeit expressed differently, comes as no surprise if one takes into account the unparalleled success that has followed the novel across the world and the compulsive readability that people frequently ascribe to it. Where, however, is the site of contention related to this readability, and how is it connected to the very critiques of plot that are at work in the Quartet and that the previous chapters have charted? Does Ferrante invoke the nineteenth century melodramatic tradition with absolutely no turn of her own? Without any literary awareness of the distance between the twenty-first century and the nineteenth century?

Donnarumma suggests this:

Elena Ferrante è per alcuni tratti una manierista del feuilleton: usa certe sue convenzioni con un’insistenza esibita, immoderata, senza nessuna vergogna; non è mai tentata, invece, di metterle fra virgolette o di parodiarle. Se usa un trucco, ci crede, perché ne fa il mezzo adeguato a raccontare una forma di vita, e lo reincanta, perché gli restituisce la capacità primitiva e un po’ ricattatoria di tenere il lettore avvinto alla storia. (139)

In some of her features, Elena Ferrante is an imitator of the feuilleton: she uses some of its conventions with immoderate insistence and displays them shamelessly; but she is never tempted to bracket or parody them. If she uses a trick, she believes in it, because she makes it the adequate means to narrate a form of life; or she reenchants it by giving it back the primitive and somewhat blackmailing capacity of keeping readers captivated by the story.

(my translation)

What is this “capacità … un po’ ricattatoria” that he speaks of? The language of the passage cannot be ignored. The lack of shame that Donnarumma attributes to Ferrante has been echoed by many others, among whom Gambaro, who writes of the “enfasi spudoratissima” (“Splendori”
language oddly implies the need to apologize, or at the very least be ashamed, of turning to literary techniques that assure the reader’s pleasure, something that Ferrante has unquestionably ruled out: “io non rinuncio a niente di ciò che può dare piacere al lettore, nemmeno a ciò che viene considerato vecchio, abusato, volgare” (La frantumaglia 260-61) / “I renounce nothing that can give pleasure to the reader, not even what is considered old, trite, vulgar” (270). That Ferrante does not hesitate to incorporate these techniques is undeniable; as is the fact that this incorporation is not as innocent as she makes it out to be and that the aforementioned pleasure is oftentimes and in ways we have elucidated in previous chapters hijacked by the novel itself. In borrowing from the feuilleton, Ferrante is in fact bracketing it, plundering its repository of techniques and forcing the form to come to terms with the antinovelistic aspects of the Quartet. Donnarumma’s assertion, then, must be taken with a grain of salt, as he himself does when proceeds to enumerate the manner in which the novel sabotages its own genre.

Because I find Donnarumma’s article to be particularly illuminating, I would like to engage with it in depth, pointing out, even if pedantically, the arguments with which I am in agreement, and those that seem more refutable. He claims, for instance, that one of the melodramatic qualities of the novel resides in its treatment of character, whereby personality traits are invariably externalized:

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204 A way of understanding Ferrante’s decision to blend genres is through her purpose to “assure the reader’s pleasure.” This technique is at the heart of the novel’s birth as a genre. Thomas Pavel has written about the seminal role that (sub)generic impurity played in the development of the novel. “Early modern narrative culture,” he writes, “emphasized the differences between subgenres, while later forms of the novel are the result of multiple attempts to blend these subgenres together” (10). And, more importantly, he argues that “the lack of a written statute, far from hindering the development of the genre, allowed its practitioners to focus on concrete ways to please the public” (7).
I personaggi posso mentire o tacere (e anzi, lo fanno spesso), ma le loro passioni si riversano nell’azione e la muovono: in questa concordanza fra essere e agire i personaggi finiscono sempre per dire la verità su loro stessi, per manifestarsi in quello che sono essenzialmente al di là di nascondimenti e bugie. Il destino dei personaggi è infatti il loro svelarsi: come accade ... a Nino. (139)

Characters can lie or keep quiet (and indeed, they often do), but their passions spill into action and guide it: in this agreement between being and acting, characters always end up telling the truth about themselves, they always manifest themselves in what they essentially are beyond the secrets and lies. Their destiny is, indeed, to reveal themselves: as happens … to Nino. (my translation)

This manifestation or externalization finds a curious parallel in the “theatrical” quality that Kundera attributes to novelists like Dostoevsky and Balzac. Erich Auerbach, too, writes of Balzac’s tendency to “sense hidden demonic forces everywhere and to exaggerate expression to the point of melodrama” (482). Possibly because of the narrative discoveries of nineteenth century realists like Flaubert, this theatrical or melodramatic aspects of the novel are usually portrayed in a negative light, as overlooking the particularities and subtleties of character development. To a certain extent, this is true of the Quartet (how could it be otherwise, with such a numerous set of characters?). Yet Donnarumma’s assertion can be challenged in a twofold manner: firstly, in her highly introspective first person narration, Elena is constantly hiding things both from others and from herself, often acting in contradictory ways; secondly, through the mere presence of Lila. Could we amend a previous statement thus: “Il destino di Lila è infatti il non svelarsi”? 
The reference to the destiny of characters is telling. Donnarumma recognizes the Quartet’s teleological design, as opposed to the feuilleton’s reliance on the accidental, as one of the central nodes of tension in the text: “In questo modo, non solo il mondo narrato è centripeto, perché lo regge la figura del ritorno; la stessa narrazione, chiusa ad anello, è rigorosamente teleologica” (141) / “In this way, not only is the narrated world centripetal, because governed by the figure of return; the narration itself, a closed circuit, is rigorously teleological” (my translation). This particular point is related to what I find most relevant about Donnarumma’s argument: “se insomma il mondo melodrammatico è saturo di eventi e di spiegazioni, quello dell’Amica geniale è insidiato dal vuoto” and “Elena Ferrante sceglie insomma il feuilleton, si appropria delle sue leggi con ostinazione, e lo sabaota, contestando l’illusione che esso ingenera: e cioè che nella vita tutto torni, tutto si ricompatti, tutto acquisti un senso” (143) / “so if the melodramatic world is saturated with events and explanations, that of L’amica geniale is threatened by emptiness [and that] Elena Ferrante therefore chooses the feuilleton, obstinately makes use of its laws, and sabotages it, criticizing the illusion that it generates: namely, that in life everything adds up, everything comes back to normal, everything gains meaning” (my translation). It is around the issue of meaning that the Quartet’s originality and intelligence revolves—what we might call, as Santovetti does, Ferrante’s “postmodern twist” (“Melodrama” 527). Santovetti identifies this twist mostly through the text’s metafictional layer; I instead arrive at it through what I have been calling instances of blurred agency and through the different structural valences of smarginatura at work in the novel. The previous chapters have made allusions to the former insofar as they represent a direct attack on traditional notions of causality and, therefore, plotting. Here, I would like to briefly take off from that discussion and explore how these attacks on plot work on a generic level.
In language similar to Donnarumma’s, Tiziana de Rogatis writes that “all’opposto di quanto accade nel feuilleton o nel thriller, il coinvolgimento del lettore è alimentato per poi essere frustrato. La serialità del genere di consumo è sabotata: i finali non chiudono … gli assassini o i rapitori non si trovano; le sparizioni non si spiegano” (Elena Ferrante 311) / “contrary to what happens in the feuilleton or in the thriller, the reader’s involvement is stimulated only to then be frustrated. The seriality of the genre of consumption is sabotaged: loose ends are not tied … murderers and kidnappers are not found; disappearances are not explained” (my translation). The metabolic disorders outlined in Chapter 1 are one of the most interesting ways in which the novel enacts this sabotage of the Bildungsroman, the feuilleton, the thriller, and the melodrama. As for the first, Elena’s Bildung—like Pip’s—is continually decentered by the other’s structural presence and thus by an entanglement that does away with the “mirage of isolate subjectivity”; her social advancement, moreover, is time and again “tainted” with the corrupt, while the abrupt arrest of Tina’s and Lila’s plots communicate a sense of thwarted Bildung.

By the novel’s debt to the feuilleton, I intend both its serialized quality and, consequently, its strong reliance on a highly plotted architecture meant to entice readers, a reliance on the Barthesian proairetic code understood thus:

Les comportements (termes du code proaïretique) s’organisent en sequences diverses, que l’inventaire doit seulement jalonner; car la séquence proaïretqiue n’est jamais que l’effet d’un artifice de lecture : quiconque lit le texter assemble certaines informations sous quelque nom générique d’actions. (26)

Actions (terms of the proairetic code) can fall into various sequences which should be indicated merely by listing them, since the proairetic code is never more than the result of
an artifice of reading; whoever reads the text amasses certain data under some generic titles for actions. (19)

Any plot must rely on both the proairetic and the hermeneutic code to entice its readers, yet I make this distinction here to highlight serial qualities. Tina’s disappearance at the very end of the penultimate *storia* creates perhaps the biggest rift in the hermeneutic code, yet its aposiopetic qualities are a direct attack on the proairetic code, as well as a trace of the antinovelistic strands of the Quartet. I read the ending of this *storia* as aposiopetic not in a strict sense of the term (as a break in speech) but in a broader, yet connected, sense connoting the abrupt break of the narration. Though I am far from suggesting a conscious reference, this aposiopesis brings to mind Sterne, a notorious user of the rhetorical figure and arguably the father of the anti-novel. In his introduction to *Tristram Shandy*, Robert Folkenflik writes that Sterne’s use of “interruption, digression, aposiopesis … incorporates temporal possibilities that a closed field cannot contain” (qtd. in Sterne 74) and goes on to argue that the highly contentious issue of whether *Tristram Shandy* was finished or not is thematically related to this. “By slowing down the pace of the story so that he cannot possibly finish,” he writes, “[Sterne] avoids the finality of all conclusions. Frank Kermode speaks of clock-time as ‘tick-tock,’ a beginning and an ending. Tristram keeps on ticking because he avoids tock” (qtd. in Sterne 192-94). Insofar as aposiopesis is a means of “avoiding tock,” it directly contributes to what Folkenflik calls Sterne’s “ambiguous form of closure” (qtd. in Sterne 260). What better formulation to describe the *storia’s* ending? Of course, this is not *L’amica geniale*’s ending (and we will discuss the return of the dolls), but if we take Tina’s disappearance to represent the end (in both senses of the word) of her plot, as well as the end of the intricately plotted text we have been reading, then aposiopesis is the rhetorical figure that best encapsulates this ambiguous closure and that most directly highjacks the reader’s
pleasure, as if, and here comes the ubiquitous colpa, we were being punished for enjoying the tragedy. Notably, too, aposiopesis serves as a rift (disintegrative and thus akin to smarginatura), contributing to the poetics of rupture that permeates the novel. Any hint of a closed circularity effected by the link between the disappearance of Tina and the loss of the dolls is precluded by this aposiopetic openness, and in particular by the refusal to “solve” the mystery. This suggests yet another valence of the term smarginatura. Treccani points out that smarginatura is “in botanica, leggera incisione all’apice di un organo... Si dice smarginato un organo che presenta un intaglio poco profondo e irregolare lungo il bordo” (“smarginatura”) / “in botany, a slight incision in the apex of an organ ... An organ is smarginato when it presents an irregular and superficial cut along its edge” (my translation). As an incision on the apex that produces an irregularity on the borders of the leaf, we can also understand smarginatura to work textually as that which prevents a sense of unambiguous or regular closure, as an incision, however tiny, on the borders—the margins—of a story that ultimately refuses to provide a smooth ending and, with it, a sense of closure. This incision, needless to say, is one and the same with the semantic openness we have been discussing, and it is emphasized through aposiopesis.

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205 In this sense, I thoroughly disagree with Elena Porciani’s assessment of Ferrante’s “medietà stilistica e tematica” (177) / “stylistic and thematic middleness” (my translation). In a particularly scathing passage, Porciani argues that “smussati gli scomodi margini di un realismo troppo esacerbato e sgradevole, questo tono ‘mediocre’ facilita non solo l’identificazione, ma proprio la lettura, che si fa scorrevole e senza inciampi, accattivante nel gratificare il lettore – o la lettrice” (177) / “once the margins of an intensified and unpleasant realism have been softened, this ‘mediocre’ tone facilitates not simply identification, but the reading itself, which flows seamlessly, captivating because it rewards its readers” (my translation). Yes, the reading is fluid and seemingly smooth yet ultimately hijacked by its metabolic failures. Porciani’s analysis fails to take into account all the instances of blurred agency that I have attempted to emphasize.

206 Many critics point out a circularity in the Quartet, whether in reference to Tina’s disappearance or to the return of the dolls (and often mentioning the frame narrative as evidence of it). I disagree, for reasons that these pages will explain.
but mostly through the text’s refusal to “solve” its mysteries, thus leading us to the hermeneutic code and our next point.

As pertains the thriller or the detective story, Ferrante has borrowed from and manipulated both since the publication of *L’amore molesto*, a novel for which the *giallo* provides a clear blueprint. *L’amica geniale*, while not as unambiguously modeled after the detective story, nevertheless borrows extensively from the genre and, in fact, opens with the mystery of a disappearance, as is Ferrante’s wont. This opening is a direct activation of the hermeneutic code, defined by Barthes as “les différents termes (formels), au gré desquels une énigme se centre, se pose, se formule, puis se retarde et enfin se dévoile)” (26) / “the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed” (18). While in *L’amore molesto* the mystery is not strictly disclosed, the customary journey to *Erklärung* is bypassed through the thematization of storytelling, so that even if Delia never learns how her mother died, what ultimately matters is her reconstruction of the story, fabrication via the thread of a story. Thus, even if unorthodox and “morbidly ambiguous,” a sense of closure to the story is provided. Not to be confused with the clear openness of the novel’s chiastic ending—“Amalia c’era stata. Io ero Amalia”—which certainly conveys a sense of open-endedness by allowing for the appropriation of the mother figure, an event signaled by the linguistic choice of verb tense, as Ferrante explains in *La frantumaglia*:

Il trapassato prossimo doveva definitivamente chiudere la vicenda unica e irripetibile di Amalia. L’imperfetto tendeva invece a riaprirla, suggerendo una sfumatura di perturbante incompiutezza e insieme assegnandole una durata in Delia, che ora poteva accogliere scientemente la madre in sé e darne rappresentazione. (52)
The pluperfect had to definitively end the unique, unrepeatable story of Amalia. The imperfect tended instead to reopen her, suggesting a nuance of disturbing incompleteness and yet allowing it to endure in Delia, who now could consciously accept her mother in herself and represent her. (57)

The *perturbante incompiutezza* is there, but it is more thematic than structural. Once again, even if the mystery of Amalia’s death is never “solved,” the story of a daughter attempting to find her mother is ultimately successful, even if in the way of arriving at this success it subverts the principles of the mystery novel. *L’amica geniale*, on the other hand, not only leaves its mysteries unsolved, but it also suggests that storytelling cannot account for these voids. Somewhat paradoxically, in this most successful story, storytelling is utterly unsuccessful, and an ending is withheld from us. Denying us knowledge of where Tina and Lila *end up* is one of the many ways in which the novel denies us an *end* as termination and purpose.

This failure also modulates the Quartet’s tense relationship with the melodrama. Paraphrasing Donnarumma’s analysis, Santovetti writes: “Donnarumma’s analysis ends up arguing that within the ‘grande melodramma’ of Ferrante, there is an opposite element, an anti-melodrama drive, that sabotages its own structure and deprives it of resolution: there is no happy ending, no order is re-established, and there is no final reward for the ‘virtuous’ character.” It is precisely this tension, Santovetti argues, that “captures precisely the novelty of Ferrante’s ‘melodramatic’ project,” thus “the combination of the nineteenth-century *feuilleton* with postmodern narrative strategies” (“Melodrama” 531). A caveat, nonetheless, as we conclude this chapter. My conception of the generic sabotage differs substantially from Santovetti’s. The true disruption of the melodramatic is not conveyed by the fact that “there is no happy ending, no order is re-established, and there is no final reward for the ‘virtuous’ character.” These are
strictly thematic issues. The question here is not one of poetic justice but, instead, an epistemological one: as Donnarumma states in the above quote, Ferrante contests “l’illusione che [il melodrama] ingenera: e cioè che nella vita tutto torni, tutto si ricompatti, tutto acquisti un senso” (emphasis mine) / “the illusion that [the melodrama] generates: that is, that in life everything adds up, everything comes back to normal, everything gains meaning.” It is neither Lila’s disappearance nor Tina’s tragic demise that distance L’amica geniale from the melodrama or the feuilleton, from the Bildungsroman or the thriller; it is not, moreover, that these two events remain unexplained, but rather that they remain inexplicable and at the service of the novel’s unsettling suggestion that order (epistemological order, the order provided by meaning) will not be restored. The narrative open-endedness that we identified in the ending of Great Expectations is taken over by Ferrante and transmuted into a semantic openness that starkly denies the possibility of wrestling a savoir from the text. Pip might still be captive to his desire when he meets Estella again, but we as readers are not shortchanged, we have acquired some form of wisdom out of the rubbles of Pip’s failure, out of the rubbles of Satis House—and that is, as the very name of the house suggests, enough. The case is the opposite with L’amica geniale. Here lies the true openness of the novel, and here lies, too, the crux of what I have tried to convey in this chapter through my discussion of, on the one hand, a generic approach to the relationship between Lila and Elena, and, on the other hand, the hybridity inscribed in the genetic (or generic) makeup of L’amica geniale: If it is through endings that we imbue with meaning everything that came before, and if, as Cavarero states, the design of a life “is not one that guides the course of a life from the beginning [but rather] what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind” (1), then, by withholding an ending, L’amica geniale denies us a design, and thus, meaning.
CONCLUSION, OR REINSTITUTION

“Mais on se fout des testaments, c’est connu.”

“Da me no.”

By withholding an ending, L’amica geniale denies us meaning. But in speaking of several textual endings, have we not ignored arguably the most important: the novel’s? Let’s recapitulate some of the observations we have made about endings: Chapter 1 explored Elena’s ending as a laying bare of the artificiality of her text; it explored, too, how Tina’s disappearance was an ending of sorts, in that it marked a disruption of the text’s metabolic processes; Chapter 4 then considered this premature conclusion as one of several forces thwarting the novel’s strict adherence to any given genre or subgenre—primarily the Bildungsroman, but also the feuilleton, the melodrama, the detective story. At this point, we must acknowledge that neither Elena’s nor Tina’s is the ultimate ending of the novel. After Elena’s text concludes, after her authorial power has been displayed, we are returned, via the epilogue, to the frame narrative, in which the dolls—Tina and Nu—mysteriously reappear. How to address this ending? Is it a return to the happiness of childhood or, as de Rogatis suggests, “al potere regressivo della cronologia, al suo scorrere all’indietro restituendo solo detriti e frammenti” (Elena Ferrante 467) / “the regressive power of chronology, its backward movement which restitutes only detritus and fragments” (my translation)? Is it the text’s remedy against the losses at its core—a reparation for Tina’s and Lila’s disappearances by way of Tina and Nu’s reappearance?

Critics seem confident in attributing this return to Lila. Understandably so, considering that Elena herself does. Van Ness states that, in returning the dolls, “Lila wrests power over the narrative back from Elena, demonstrates that she has been in control all along” (310). Falotico, in turn, claims that “se si considera il valore simbolico connesso all’episodio delle due bambole ...
il gesto oscuro di Lila suona come monito e come riconciliazione” (110) / “if we consider the symbolic value of the episode of the dolls ... Lila’s obscure gesture appears as a warning and as a reconciliation” (my translation). These are doubtless revelatory assertions, and something about this episode seems to—somehow, even if we are not sure how—tilt the scales in favor of Lila.

An important caveat, however, before I proceed to discuss how this Restituzione might work towards balancing certain textual forces: no definitive evidence is given to unequivocally claim that Lila is in fact behind this return. Like the other mysteries in the novel, this one is better left untouched; for it to remain inexplicable is, as I have been trying to argue, central to the epistemological critique that the novel advances. Which does not mean that we cannot interpret the return as a triumph. Elena does, and perceives it, in fact, as a manipulative triumph: “Ecco cosa aveva fatto: mi aveva ingannata, mi aveva trascinata dove voleva lei, fin dall’inizio della nostra amicizia. Per tutta la vita aveva raccontato una sua storia di riscatto, usando il mio corpo vivo e la mia esistenza” (SBP 451) / “Here’s what she had done: she had deceived me, she had dragged me wherever she wanted, from the beginning of our friendship. All our lives she had told a story of redemption that was hers, using my living body and my existence” (SLC 473). In speaking of triumph, we are inevitably speaking of conflict, and it is worth noting that the novel’s epilogue chooses to highlight precisely this—the conflicting aspects of Lila and Elena’s friendship.

Perhaps the first thing to note about the epilogue is that, in a manner, it stands outside the plotted ground of the novel. Strictly speaking, while it is subsumed under the first-person narration, it is not part of Elena’s text and, therefore, free from her authorial control, making
explicit a dramatization of the life-plot relationship that we have been charting. If in the previous chapters we explored beginnings and middles in light of endings, in these concluding pages I would like to work obversely, by approaching the novel’s ending in light of its beginning. Based on my previous analysis of the ascent to Don Achille’s house as the plot’s originary scene, made possible by the descent into the scantinato (where the dolls were thrown), I would like to posit the following, via an addition to Chapter 1’s various elaborations of the question *To what end does Lila throw the dolls?*, and taking into consideration Chapter 4’s discussion of what we called narrative theodicy: Can we, even if provisionally, say that *Lila throws the dolls so that there can be a story?*

This might appear facile, but some exposition will help to clarify. I wrote elsewhere of the importance of directionality in *L’amica geniale*. That the ascent of the originary scene is made possible by a descent into the scantinato is telling. Scholars, among which de Rogatis and Falotico, have pointed out the importance of this lowly space in Ferrante’s imaginary, in particular to her conception of writing. Ferrante writes, in *La frantumaglia*:

> Ci sono, invece, certi fondali bassi del raccontare che mi attraggono. Con gli anni, per esempio, mi vergogno sempre meno di come mi appassionavo alle storie dei giornaletti femminili che circolavano per casa; robaccia di amori e tradimenti, che però mi ha causato emozioni indelebili, un desiderio di trame non necessariamente sensate, il godimento di passioni forti e un po’ volgari. Anche questo scantinato dello scrivere, fondo pieno di piacere che per anni ho represso in nome della Letteratura, mi pare che

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207 As mentioned before, scholars like Gambaro write of the importance of the *nesso vita/scrittura*. Santovetti writes of a gap embodied in the two friends “between writing and life” (“Melodrama” 534). This is mostly what I mean, yet my stress falls not on writing per se, but on plotting.

208 As it is in *Great Expectations*.  

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vada messo al lavoro, perché non solo sui classici ma anche lì è cresciuta la smania di racconto, e allora ha senso gettare via la chiave? (59)

There are, rather, certain low levels of storytelling that appeal to me. Over the years, for example, I’ve become less ashamed of how much I like the stories in the women’s magazines I find around the house: trash about love and betrayal, which has produced in me indelible emotions, a desire for not necessarily logical plots, a taste for strong, slightly vulgar passions. It seems to me that this cellar of writing, a fund of pleasure that for years I repressed in the name of Literature, should also be put to work, because it was not only with the classics but there, too, that the desire for storytelling developed, and so does it make sense to throw away the key? (64)

This scandinato dello scrivere / cellar of writing is conceived by Ferrante as a “fund,” and therefore as an affective space that serves as a repository of stories. Akin to frantumaglia? It would certainly appear so. It is, doubtless, also akin to fabula. Reconfiguring it thus allows us to posit the scandinato as a figure of life or the real, as that which stands in opposition to the plotted ground, and the space where the stories that we tell can be found. These stories (not really stories, but that of which stories are made) need not be logical; in fact, they work outside the bounds of logic, and as such bring to mind Ferrante’s discussion of frantumaglia. They are not only raw material for storytelling, but are also shorn of any conceptions of high and low literature.

So down to the cellar must the girls go in search of a story. The Faustian inscription in the text’s genetic makeup continually underscores the act of plotting as a Teufelspakt which renders the engagement with perversion inescapable. Hence it is into Don Achille’s cellar that the dolls are thrown, just as it is the loan shark’s money that enables Elena’s Bildung. In this
sense, the dolls incarnate the transaction central to this *Teufelpakt*. More specifically, as the
device charged with bringing the narration out of quiescence, they are, we could say, the
sacrificial object given in exchange for the act of plotting to occur. The connection that Falotico
makes between the *scantinato* in the novel and Ferrante's *scantinato dello scrivere* suggests this
sacrificial function. Tina and Nu are thrown into the *scantinato* (*dello scrivere*) in order to
activate the *sortilegio* that alchemizes reality (the dolls, “cheap and ugly”) and transforms it into
fiction (the novel we are reading). If we understand their original loss as a sacrificial one, then
their return is, firstly, a form of ransom: given in exchange for a story, they are now taken back
as the fiction we are reading comes to an end. Elena’s language echoes this: “aveva raccontato
una *sua* storia di riscatto, usando il *mio* corpo vivo e la *mia* esistenza” / “she had told a story of
redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence.” Though *riscatto* means both
ransom and redemption—and Elena probably means it in the second sense, as Goldstein renders
it—the more negative connotations that signal to the transactional qualities I have been
highlighting should not go unnoticed. Elena’s language, the italicization of the possessive
adjectives and its emphasis on entanglement and deceit, underscores this.

As the dolls are restituted, the principle of reality is *reinstituted*. I have tried to outline the
ways in which one of the many tensions between the two friends is that between matter and
form, or *fabula* and plot, or *frantumaglia* and *storia*, namely, the life/story opposition. Of course,
the dichotomy must be taken with a pinch of salt; the impossibility of escaping from the clutches
of temporality, as Lukács knew, entails the impossibility of escaping plot. This, however, does
not preclude the postulation of what Chapter 2 discussed as a “life in its pure state,” just as the
inaccessibility of the *fabula* does not preclude our reconstruction of it through the *sjužet*. In
general terms, Elena, as storyteller, is representative of the act of plotting, while Lila, in her
eternal elusiveness, seems to position herself as the principle of reality (or life in its pure state), perennially referenced, never present. In other words, she is the wellspring of storytelling. This is thematized time and again in the novel, particularly through the many instances in which we see Lila’s influence behind Elena’s writing and thinking. Not surprisingly, Lila’s writing is absent, always referenced, never present, and in the act of referencing it, in the act even of narrating Lila, we encounter the novel’s central conceit and its commentary on the limits of storytelling. Once again, Ferrante’s comments in *La frantumaglia* are useful. She writes of her wish to tell of a complex friendship between two women:

Ma, come faccio di solito, volevo anche raccontarla in modo che la voce narrante palesemente si tacesse una parte del racconto, come se non riuscisse a portarlo fino in fondo o come se le sue pagine fossero la brutta copia di una storia che non riuscirà mai ad arrivare in bella perché è l’altra, colei che non racconta ma è raccontata, ad avere la potenza per portarla pienamente a compimento. (300)

But, as I usually do, I also wanted to tell it in a way so that the narrative voice is openly silent about a part of the story, as if she couldn’t complete it, or as if its pages were the rough draft of a story that will never achieve a finished version, because it’s the other, she who doesn’t describe but is described, who has the power to bring it fully to the end.

(310-11)

It’s telling that Ferrante reconfigures the translational relationship as one between a draft (*brutta copia*) and a fair copy or finished version (*bella*). This opens up new roads of interpretation, for, on the one hand, the possibility presents itself that Elena’s text will always be imperfect and will only bear a platonic semblance of truth compared to the “original.” There is another important point: as we discussed at the end of Chapter 4, the novel, by short-circuiting its various endings,
becomes laden with epistemological ambiguity. If it is in light of endings that we read
beginnings and middles, by either exposing the artificiality of endings (“ce [que la fiction] a de
concerté”) or by denying them point-blank, the novel sabotages the fundamental interpretive
activity that leads us to grasp the “text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the
metonymies that have led to it” (Brooks 108). Envisioning the text as a rough draft, by definition
an unfinished one, works toward emphasizing this epistemological ambiguity. Which raises the
question: How do we read an unfinished work? And is it worth our time to hypothesize about the
possibility of a finished one? Here, I part ways with Ferrante; suggesting that Lila would have
been capable of writing the story is futile; the point is that Elena cannot and that her text is
nothing but a rough draft. Or, if we take the Italian brutta copia and in an exercise of
mistranslation (and thus of betrayal) render it literally, it is nothing but an “ugly copy.”

This copy is in itself a mistranslation of sorts. Falkoff argues that the Quartet performs
the famous Italian proverb whereby to translate is to betray (“tradurre è tradire”). The novels, she
writes, “translate by rewriting Lila’s lost pages, along with the Neapolitan dialect that is
continually alluded to but virtually excluded from the tetralogy. They betray not only by
dulling Lila’s expressive force … but also by their very existence, as Elena had promised Lila
never to write about her.” The connection to the linguistic is of great relevance. Although we left
this issue largely unexplored, it is nonetheless significant to note that one of the principal
reconfigurations of the life-into-story translation is precisely the dialect-into-Italian translation.
After all, dialect is an unbearable yet ubiquitous presence, and, as such, it is part of the
wellspring of storytelling. Like Lila, it is constantly referenced, barely present.

It makes sense to read Elena’s text as a “translation.” Of Lila’s hypothetical text, yes, but
also of the numerous texts she writes that inspire Elena, such as La fata blu or the document on
the working conditions at Bruno Soccavo’s factory (we must amend our previous statement then, for it seems that positing the existence of Lila’s hypothetical text does play an important role in establishing Elena’s as a copy). Falkoff’s argument that Elena betrays Lila by “dulling [her] expressive force” and by ignoring the injunction not to write about her is convincing, especially given the intricate relationship we have identified between plotting and colpa. Moreover, positing that Elena’s text is a translation from a hypothetical text subverts common hierarchies governing the original/translation dynamic—the original here remains unattainable—and recalls Borges’s assertion about Vathek, that “el original es infiel a la traducción” (207) / “the original is unfaithful to the translation” (my translation). Brooks, too, reminds us that repetition calls into question the notion of an original, and what is translation, we ask, but a repetition of sorts? And because, as he points out, difference is key to repetition—“without difference, repetition would be identity” (124)—then we can posit that the gap between Elena and Lila, between the translation and the original, while governed by a desire for unity (or identity), is ultimately the gap effected by linguistic difference. Not by chance does de Rogatis point out that “il dialetto si situa nella griglia spaziale del basso, lì dove si trovano anche l’«interrato» dell’Amore molesto, lo «scantinato» della quadrilogia e la caverna della Frantumaglia” (Parole 2,488) / “dialect is situated in the spatial grid of the low, there where we can also find the ‘basement’ of Troubling Love, the ‘cellar’ of the tetralogy, and the cave of Frantumaglia” (my translation).209

209 The more I think about it, the more central the issue of translation seems to be. The conceit that I’m trying to communicate in these pages whereby the Quartet itself is the unsuccessful translation of a hypothetical text is just one facet of this. The equally hypothetical translation from dialect into Italian is another facet. But take, for instance, the issue of thematic translatability: Ferrante has worked and reworked the same themes in the course of her career as a writer (one of the reasons that prompted me to prioritize form). What makes a subject translatable? On an entirely different level, is it ironic that the novels have achieved unparalleled critical and public success not in their original language, but abroad and in translation? Is this an unexpected confirmation of one of the Quartet’s central motifs, that we never come into contact with the “reality”? Even my present discussion of a reinstitution of the principle of
Yet, in disgorging the dolls, what does the *scantinato*—that spatial representation of the wellspring of storytelling—set in motion? In a sense, we have come out of the rabbit hole.\(^{210}\) de Rogatis notes that the dolls mark “l’inizio e la fine del tempo magico” (*Parole* 807) / “the beginning and end of magical time” (my translation). In my understanding, they are the transactional objects that allow not exactly for magical time begin, but for plot time to unfold. That the dolls come back in the epilogue, which stands *outside* the *storie*, is not coincidental. It allows us to interpret the event as a triumph of Lila while bypassing the problems of attributing to her the return of the dolls and, in doing so, “solving” a mystery that the text requires to maintain as such. The triumph is Lila’s insofar as the return constitutes a re(in)stitution of the principle of life, of which she is representative. Superficially, this reinstition might contribute to the idea of a circle that has been closed, of a “neat” ending, yet this is firmly ruled out by the text’s semantic fissures. In keeping its mysteries unsolved (unsolvable, rather)—including the mystery of the return of the dolls—the text maintains its status as *smarginato* (in the botanical sense outlined in Chapter 4).

Furthermore, can we say that the openness caused by this incision, an openness of the hermeneutic code, in any way affects the metabolic functions of the text? The *scantinato* disgorges the dolls, after all. If we argued that the last *storia* was made hypothyroidic by Tina’s disappearance, do the dolls constitute a reactivation of the textual energies that had been lost for over a hundred pages? But given the fact that a reactivation of catabolic functions provides with the energies necessary to initiate plot, how would we reconcile this to the idea that the restitution reality must be taken with a pinch of salt, for it is still enclosed in the novel, subsumed under the fictive exercise.

\(^{210}\) Critics have not ignored the reference to Carroll’s Alice in *L’amore molesto*. To my knowledge, however, no one has explored the relationship between *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *L’amica geniale*.
of the dolls is a reinstatement of the reality principle? We have been underlining the text’s epistemological openness. In returning, the dolls might be reinstating the principle of reality, but they are simultaneously opening another rift in the text: the mystery of their own provenance. Very importantly, this mystery is qualitatively different from the others, which are subsumed under Elena’s authorial reconstruction. The mystery of the dolls presents itself not as a commentary on the epistemology of storytelling, but of life itself. Not only are we left with the troubling suggestion that stories cannot capture the meaning of life, but rather that there is no meaning to speak of in the first place. The novel necessarily leaves us with an image of obscurity: “A differenza che nei racconti, la vita vera, quando è passata, si sporge non sulla chiarezza ma sull’oscurità. Ho pensato: ora che Lila si è fatta vedere così nitidamente, devo rassegnarmi a non vederla più” (SBP 451) / “Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity. I thought: now that Lila has let herself be seen so plainly, I must resign myself to not seeing her anymore” (SLC 473). An affirmation of obscurity, a reiteration of the novel’s poetics of rupture.

Still, in reopening a mystery that we had left behind, can this return, to invoke Brooks’s criticism of the ending of Great Expectations, unbind “energies that we thought had been thoroughly bound and indeed discharged from the text”? In a way, it does, for even if the mystery of the doll’s disappearance was never solved, the text had, at least superficially, moved on to other considerations. A reinstatement of this mystery outside the margins of a plot that has ended (and suffered from a metabolic breakdown) cannot but destabilize. While the mists at the end of Great Expectation bespoke the cyclical and undying nature of Pip’s desire, the asymmetrical presence of the dolls (asymmetrical because they appear in the embedded narrative and reappear in the embedding narrative) speaks also of cyclical desire, but of one that is
entangled in a more tense dialectic. Or a dialectic point blank, for if in Pip’s relationship with Estella we witness a form unidirectional desire, the Quartet is built on the principle of bidirectionality. My conception of desire’s triangularity (its prepositionality) still stands; what I mean here is that *Great Expectations* is fueled by Pip desires through and toward Estella, who nevertheless remains a vessel, while the Quartet necessarily must live in the space between Elena and Lila, who are both desiring agents. If Elena’s desires take precedence in the embedded narrative, it is because she controls the narration, but it is precisely in the epilogue that balance is, in a way, restored. Or restituted. In fact, these few pages bring us closer to Lila than the preceding 1700 pages ever did: “ora che Lila si è fatta vedere così nitidamente” (*SBP* 451) / “now that Lila has let herself be seen so plainly” (*SLC* 473). This is a somewhat paradoxical form of appearance, rooted in absence and representative of a poetics of rupture. What we have here is the revindication of an entropic figure, not the disconcerting sort of entropy with which *Great Expectations* threatened us, but rather one that results from a reconfiguration of the text’s energies. If, as we stated in Chapter 1, the novel is initiated by Elena’s desire to write with, to, for, and more importantly, *over* Lila—if this desire constitutes the text’s strongest source of catabolism, the ending presents us with a shift in the economy of this desire. We have, now, the *institution* of Lila’s desire outside the bounds of Elena’s text. Lila’s desire is possible, but only on the margins, outside of Elena’s, in the “space off.”

In establishing the existence of this desire, is the novel finding a thermodynamic equilibrium? I wrote just now that the epilogue reinstitutes balance, but at this point in our study we should know better than to buy into the conception of a truly isolated textual system. As Chapter 3 pointed out, fictions that traffic in desire inevitably leave a residue behind, an excess. At the same time, this “triumph” forces us to recalibrate the energetic transactions of the text. I
cannot but once again raise the issue of *colpa*, a notion implied in the very concept of restitution.\(^{211}\) We must ask ourselves: what is being restituted, and to whom? Outwardly, the dolls are being returned to Elena, who had so keenly suffered the loss of Tina. But even here we find a residue, in the form of Nu. A restitution *sensu stricto* would have involved only the doll that was stolen from Elena. It is precisely the excess—the *resto*—in this transaction that must necessarily nudge us in a different interpretive direction. While we have discussed the restitution as a form of a reinstitution of the principle of reality, we are presently led to rearrange the agents of the reparation, or rather, the directionality of the reparation itself. In other words, it is not Lila who “pays back” for a damage that she has caused, but Elena. But what is it, we ask, that Elena must restitute her friend for? What is Elena guilty of?

Simply put, writing. Once again, the end, *Restituzione*, returns us to the beginning (which is also an end): *Cancellare le tracce*. If we look at it closely, we cannot fail to realize that the entirety of Elena’s text is tainted with her culpability. The text is the “trace,” the evidence, of Elena’s guilt because it stands in clear defiance of Lila’s request not to be written about. Not only; it is also a manifest contradiction of her wishes to vanish. Put differently, to Lila’s decision to eliminate all traces of her existence, Elena responds by reinscribing those traces, but in her own terms. “Volevo che lei durasse,” she writes. “Ma volevo essere io a farla durare. Credevo che fosse il mio compito. Ero convinta che lei stessa, da ragazzina, me lo avesse assegnato” (*SBP* 441) / “I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task. I was convinced that she herself, as a girl, had assigned it to me” (*SLC* 463). As I briefly mentioned in a footnote, Elena’s decision to write about Lila is ultimately an act of arrogance.

This is most explicitly conveyed by Ferrante in *La frantumaglia*, when she discusses the

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\(^{211}\) As it is in the concept of disgorgement, at least in its legal sense. How do we understand the return of the dolls as a form of legal disgorgement, as the restitution of goods obtained in an illicit manner?
arrogation of the right to imprison others in writing, but it is even communicated by Elena herself, a mere paragraph after the above quotation: “C’è questa presunzione, in chi si sente destinato alle arti e soprattutto alla letteratura: si lavora come se si fosse ricevuta un’investitura, ma in effetti nessuno ci ha mai investiti di alcunché” (441-42) / “There is this presumption, in those who feel destined for art and above all literature: we act as if we had received an investiture, but in fact no one has ever invested us with anything” (463). At the beginning, then, an act of treason. An ars poetica even, in that it reflects writing practices at large. Yes, we can approach Elena’s text as a recuperation of her friend’s life and therefore as a positive act, but we cannot turn a blind eye on this more sinister undercurrent. Elena is writing over her friend. She is ob-literating her. Not by chance is the formulation “far durare” / “make last” said only twice in the Quartet’s 1700 pages: once by Elena, toward the end, but before that by Michele Solara, also in reference to Lila. We would do well to think of what these two characters have in common in their relationship to Lila.

The arrogation of the right to write repositions Elena’s text as the figure of a testament betrayed. Kundera has written at length about this idea, taking Max Brod as the model for disobedience to one’s friends. Brod, as is widely known, decided to publish Kafka’s writings against his explicit wishes. He did so, he claimed, out of veneration for his dead friend. Kundera writes:

Mais il faut comprendre le mystère de la vénération absolue : elle est en même temps, et fatalement, le déni absolu de la volonté esthétique de l’auteur. Car la volonté esthétique se manifeste aussi bien par ce que l’auteur a écrit que par ce qu’il a supprimé. Supprimer un paragraphe exige de sa part encore plus talent, de culture, de force créatrice que de
l’avoir écrit. Publier ce que l’auteur a supprimé est donc le même acte de viol que censurer ce qu’il a décidé de garder. (*Testaments* 321)

But understand the mystery of absolute veneration: it is also, and inevitably, the absolute denial of the author’s aesthetic wishes. For aesthetic wishes show not only by what an author has written but also by what he has deleted. Deleting a paragraph calls for even more talent, cultivation, and creative power than writing it does. Therefore, publishing what the author deleted is the same act of rape as censoring what he decided to retain. (*Testaments* 268-69)

Can we relate Kundera’s remarks on the creative power of deletion to Elena’s assertion that, for Lila, “cancellarsi era una sorta di progetto estetico” (*SBP* 433) / “eliminating herself was a sort of aesthetic project” (*SLC* 455)? Doing so sheds light on the deeply violent implications of not only ignoring but actively working against Lila’s erasure. Why would Elena do this? Once again, the accounts with culpability are never closed. The palimpsestic impulse can be understood as a form of punishment for what Elena perceives to be a betrayal: “Mi sono sentita molto arrabbiata. Vediamo chi la spunta questa volta, mi sono detta” (*AG* 19) / “I was really angry. We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself” (*MBF* 23). A betrayal that makes Lila culpable right off the start.

We have entered the deep well of blame here, a seemingly never-ending cycle of perceived offenses and subsequent retributions. Given our observations in Chapter 3 about guilt’s abidance to the first law of thermodynamics, what can we conclude? What is the result of all these subtractions and additions? The following chart presents what I see as the text’s strongest

212 Before we go on, however, a brief technical note: even though Lila cannot be certain that Elena is writing the text we are reading, we do have strong textual evidence to conclude that she knows of the existence of *Un’amicizia*, which, albeit a different text, constitutes the same kind of betrayal (as Chapter 1 explored).
acts of culpability (acts that have a clear effect on the novel’s structure), divided by how they are presented in the *sjužet* and how we can infer they occurred in the *fabula*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fabula</th>
<th>Sjužet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lila makes Tina disappear</td>
<td>Lila disappears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena writes Tina's disappearance and blames Lila</td>
<td>Elena writes Lila's disappearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lila disappears</td>
<td>Lila makes Tina disappear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena writes Lila's disappearance</td>
<td>Elena writes Tina's disappearance and blames Lila</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that each event tends to simultaneously be an act of punishment on the agent’s part and a sign of culpability as perceived by the recipient. So, for instance, Chapter 1 suggested that Elena wrote of Tina’s disappearance to avenge the loss of the doll Tina. In this scenario, Lila is culpable in the eyes of Elena. This same act, however, is then perceived by Lila as a deep betrayal, making therefore Elena culpable and prompting Lila to disappear. Elena, in turn, reacts to this disappearance by writing *over* (or across) Lila’s disappearance. This (con)sequential progress is best delineated on the left column. Notice, too, that Lila is always tending toward disappearance, whereas Elena inevitably turns to writing, an act that gains a retributive valence. On the right column, that of the *sjužet*, the events are listed in the order in which they are presented to us. The consequentiality is not as evident—strangely, one might say, given our statements regarding plot’s propensity to order and impose causality, yet if we infer a form of
causality on the left column, it is only through what Elena tells us on the right, so that the idea that the chain of culpability begins with Lila actually originates in the *sjužet*. Once again, “reality” becomes inaccessible. What most interests me here is that only *Restituzione* occupies the same place in both the *fabula* and the *sjužet* (fifth), so that rather than restoring balance, it sets it off. It *reopens* the accounts, if anything, since one could say that retributive balance had been achieved in the process of the first four events. This restitution/reinstitution is in *excess*, it goes *beyond*. Or, as I said before, the *institution* of Lila’s desire occurs outside the bounds of Elena’s text, becomes possible only in the “space off.”

I borrow this expression from Teresa de Lauretis, who, in *Technologies of Gender*, elaborates on the possibility of creating new spaces of discourse and, eventually, a different construction of gender. These new spaces enable fresh perspectives, “a view from ‘elsewhere’” (25) that, however, is not recognizable as *representation*. That elsewhere, de Lauretis writes, is not some myopic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati.

(25)

Interestingly, de Lauretis clarifies that this “elsewhere” is not *beyond*, nor is it outside the boundaries of representation, since no reality exists outside discourse. “What I mean,” she writes, “is a movement from the space represented by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them” (26). Here is where the concept of “space off” appears, which she in turn borrows from film theory and which refers to “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible” (26). This is important,
because even though I have been speaking of a space beyond or outside the margins, a description that de Lauretis would seem to contend, the space I posit is coterminous with the concept of “space off,” not least because this space—the frantumaglia, fabula, life in its pure form, etc.—is not directly accessible, but inferable. de Lauretis’s precision allows me to clarify that the beyond I have been speaking of is only in a manner outside the bounds of plot; ultimately, everything is subsumed under plot. Which is also why the novel’s several moments of smarginatura—liminal—allow an inference of this “space off.” Can we then ascribe to L’amica geniale what de Lauretis ascribes to avant-garde cinema, namely, the capacity to show “the space-off to exist concurrently and alongside the represented space, [making] it visible by remarking its absence in the frame or in the succession of frames”? (26).

The issue of representation is relevant to this dissertation; Chapter 4 set out—and, admittedly, failed—to answer the question “How can we tell of an erasure?” This problem, as we have stated, is ultimately a narrative problem, but as de Lauretis shows us, it is also discursive and related to gender. de Lauretis elaborates on the subject of feminism, which she takes to be characterized by a movement between the represented and what is left out, or, as she calls it, the “unrepresentable”:

It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist, since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins (or “between the lines,” or “against the grain”) of hegemonic discourses and in the interstices of institutions, in counterpractices and new forms of community: These two kinds … coexist concurrently and in contradiction.… Thus, to inhabit both kinds of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which, I have
suggested, is the condition of feminism here and now: the tension of a twofold pull in contrary directions—the critical negativity of its theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics—is both the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility. The subject of feminism is en-gendered there. That is to say, elsewhere. (26)

Some of the generic tensions that we identified in Chapter 4 can be alternatively thought of in the terms proposed above. If in Elena’s Bildung and in the world of the rione we encounter the spaces of hegemonic discourse, in Lila we constantly find the “space off,” the “elsewhere.” I do not mean by this to imply that L’amica geniale is only a book-length experiment on the possibility of an alternative feminist discourse, although that is what many critics have seen in it. Treating it as such, I believe, comes at the cost of running roughshod over many of its tensions; nevertheless, de Lauretis’s framework allows us to rethink Lila’s narrative positionality. Perhaps, this is ultimately what her erasure conveys—a literary manifestation of critical negativity.

Ever der Geist der stets verneint, Lila utters her last words in the novel as a negative. Da me no. It is important that Lila’s relationship to the negative is what the novel leaves us with, for it highlights at once the novelistic aspects we have discussed, as well as Lila’s customary response to the world—dissent. Ferrante has written in La frantumaglia about the decision not to participate:

La scomparsa delle donne non va interpretata solo come un crollo della combattività di fronte alla violenza del mondo, ma anche come rifiuto netto. C’è in italiano un’espressione intraducibile nel suo doppio significato: “io non ci sto”. Se presa alla lettera significa: io non sono qui, in questo luogo, di fronte a ciò che mi state proponendo
di accettare. Nel suo significato comune suona invece: non sono d’accordo, non voglio. Il rifiuto è assentarsi dai giochi di chi schiaccia tutti i deboli. (317)

The disappearance of women should be interpreted not only as giving up the fight against the violence of the world but also as clear rejection. There is an expression in Italian whose double meaning is untranslatable: “Io non ci sto.” Literally it means: I’m not here, in this place, before what you’re suggesting. In common usage, it means, instead: I don’t agree, I don’t want to. Rejection means shunning the games of those who crush the weak. (327)

We hear Clarissa’s question once again: “Why should I be denied the liberty of refusing? That liberty is all I ask.” Except that Lila does not ask for this liberty. She arrogates it through her own cancellatura (as she had done—practiced—with her wedding photograph).213 As I briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, Ferrante’s decision to frame disintegration in typographical terms is significant. It points to the ways in which erasure and self-erasure can coexist: this is most glaringly true toward the end of the second volume, when Lila burns La fata blu. An unresolvable tension envelops the moment, a physical manifestation of Lila’s tendency to self-erasure that simultaneously carries undeniable overtones of immolation: if the dolls are the sacrificial objects that enable the story of a friendship, then the burning of La fata blu insinuates itself as the necessary sacrifice for Elena’s first novel to be published; just as the destruction of Lila’s diaries was necessary for Elena to live in peace. Ever a sacrifice, ever a transaction. A charged site of contradiction in which creation and destruction coexist, another manifestation of

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213 Milkova makes this point about Lila’s destruction of her wedding photograph: “To destroy her image is to delete—and hence liberate—herself from the system which contains and controls her” (“Elena Ferrante’s Visual Poetics” 176).
the figure of the *altalena*. Of course, this burning is a self-immolation as well if we consider that Lila burns her own manuscript, and as such represents a form of textual insurrection. By erasing her text, Lila practices insurrection against the texts she has inherited. *To practice. Then practice losing farther, losing faster.* So many things—Lila—seem filled with the intent to be lost. But does this loss entail textual disaster?

Lila finally carries out loss through her disappearance and the arrogation of the right to refuse. This arrogation comes with a shift in the economy of desire that I mentioned above. By reinvigorating the text through the return of the dolls and its concomitant reactivation of textual energies, Lila reclaims, from the “space off,” her desire. This leftover of desire does not function as it does in *Great Expectations*. We have no sense of overemplotment here. To reiterate, while the endings of both *L’amica geniale* and *Great Expectations* have in common that they leave us with an excess of desire, in Dickens the semantic potentialities of plotting remain intact. Yes, the cyclicality of Pip’s desire is unsettling both thematically in what it says about our ways of desiring and formally in its interrogation of the *Bildungsroman,* but everything in the novel, to the most insignificant occurrence, becomes laden with meaning in light of the end. *Great Expectations,* much as it might question its genre, displays an unwavering faith in the power of storytelling, and it consolidates the authorial figure and its capacity to impose design; this figure might take the shape of Miss Havisham, or Magwitch, or Dickens himself—but there remains no question that the novel leaves us with a sense of overemplotment. This is what I attempted to convey in Chapter 3, much as it might have appeared as a digression in our discussion of Ferrante (I hope this will be excused; after all, we have been ascertaining the importance of

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214 Or, given our adherence to the textual law of thermodynamics, they are neither created nor destroyed, simply transformed—and transferred.
215 In a reference, perhaps, to Virgil’s purported wish to burn the *Aeneid*?
digression). In *L'amica geniale*, on the contrary, so much meaning is imparted even on the most minute incidences, only to be withdrawn at the end—so much mystery built around incidents that is never solved. The novel, at the end, throws all its design and intention out the window, confidently denying us any unified sense of meaning. There is no overemploioment here either, for the simple fact that the economy of desire has shifted to Lila and into the threat of entropy, away from the complexity of form and into the space of raw material free from constraints.\(^\text{216}\) Destructive, perhaps, but Lila’s entropic functionality (while perceived as evil by many in the text) is ultimately italicized in the epilogue—that most marginal of spaces. *Da me no*. With these three words Lila proclaims her negative, a negative put in the service of a poetics of rupture at work outside the margins. A negative to provide meaning. *Smarginata*, Lila becomes unbound.

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*L'amica geniale* might deny us meaning. But, did it ever owe us meaning in the first place? Did the tacit pact established when we began reading the Quartet stipulate an exchange of our time for meaning in any shape or form? The answer, of course, is both no and yes. No because such a contract is inexistent or at least never made explicit; yes because, as the critics on whose work this study has relied well know, meaning unfolds through time, or is at least constructed in it, making of narrative (in a broad sense) a central category of our epistemic practices, as indispensable as it is inescapable.\(^\text{217}\) If storytelling makes something clear about our way of constructing the world, it is that meaning is transactional. The way we read novels is no

\(^{216}\) Ferrante has been preoccupied with the issue of formlessness since *L'amore molesto*. Wehling-Giorgi writes that “self-mutilation appears to stand as a form of reclaiming agency in Ferrante’s novels, a way of appropriating conventional constructs of the female body as not only lack or absence, but *formlessness*” (“Playing” 11). Erasure, too, would be a way to reclaim formlessness.

\(^{217}\) Brooks: “Narrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the large categories in which we think. Plot is its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives” (323).
different. Fielding understood this very well, regardless of how mercenary his metaphor for storytelling might appear to us now. However a story comes to us (even if, as often happens, it comes from us), we demand meaning from it in exchange for our attention. We come to expect meaning, even feel we are entitled to it. It is no surprise, then, that by the time we reach the end of the Quartet, we cannot but sense that we have been cheated, shortchanged, or as Donnarumma sees it, blackmailed. “Vi imbroglio tutti.” In Lila’s words is captured the crux of storytelling; in these three words is encapsulated the deceptive power of plot, the “capacità … un po’ ricattatoria” of engrossing an audience. Or perhaps “entangle” is a more adequate word. We are entangled in the narration from the moment we enter into the pact; and from the moment we decide to be absorbed by its plot, the moment we ascend the steps to Don Achille’s house with Lila and Elena, we, too, become implicated. After all, imbrogliare also means to entangle. “Vi imbroglio tutti.” I’ll cheat you all, yes, but I’ll entangle you in the process. We might try to wash this implication off our hands, as Jaggers does, but it is useless. Literature is made out of tangles.
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