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***The Narrative Function of Clothing in  
Elena Ferrante's Troubling Love***

*Abstract*

Elena Ferrante's first published novel *Troubling Love* deals with the dark side of the mother-daughter relation as no other of her works. The narration takes the form of a painful assembly of events, dealing with both rupture and continuity between the narrator Delia and the story's protagonist, her mother Amalia. Essentially, Delia sews images together as they emerge from her visceral, rather than intellectual or even imaginative revisiting of her childhood and adolescence. Amalia's drowned body is progressively dressed by Delia's pieces of memory, equivalent to clothing items that shape the narrative's fabric. Part of the communication among different characters happens through exchange of clothes, fabric and lingerie, corresponding to their attempts to tailor Amalia's narrative in the name of their troubled love, which comes in different patterns. Delia's recollections of episodes of domestic violence, however, convey laceration and amorphousness, as she continuously stitches and makes adjustments, whereas no clothes or narratives can contain the true Amalia. This essay intends to highlight the path along which the narration's thread runs. It explores the correspondences between the text's form and content, and analyzes the narrator's struggle to come to terms with a character whose very substance remains unreachable, encrypted in her old garments that have resisted violence, manipulation, and imposition of forms.

Key-words: Mother-daughter relation; Elena Ferrante; narrative body; clothing; amorphousness

*1. Dressing the narrative body*

If each of Elena Ferrante's published works deals with the dark side of the mother-daughter relationship while raising intentionally uncomfortable questions, her first novel *Troubling Love* revolves around such an intricate subject more than any other writings, by digging into muddy materials, from which uneasy matter emerges. Amalia's drowning on her daughter Delia's birthday immediately links life and death, preparing a narrative construction in which the two women face a disorienting conflict among different forces, such as attraction, resistance and repulsion. Amalia's body is progressively dressed by Delia's fragments of memory, each corresponding to clothing items that function as the narrative's fabric, whose tears arise from the vortex of a voice that

struggles to re-sew it all together while narrating. The author's use of a rich terminology pertaining to the process of making clothes throughout the text establishes a parallel between the acts of sewing and narrating, accentuating the centrality of clothing as both a thematic and a structural component of the novel.

According to a metaphor used by renowned author Mario Vargas Llosa, the art of narrating can be compared to a backward striptease, in which an initially naked body is progressively dressed with clothes created, one at the time, by the novelist's imagination (VARGAS LLOSA 2002).<sup>1</sup> This image suggests much more than the blank page to be filled with words; the conception of a naked story as a pre-existing body implies that the narrative's substance is the result of the careful elaboration of an initial idea: even though such nudity is perceivable as a literary intuition, it needs layers of validation to take tangible form and reveal its physicality, so that the story can become public and be shared. Vargas Llosa's idea of dressing the narrative body is comparable to Ferrante's emphasis on seaming the fabric of the story in order to dress the body. Virginia Woolf's novels often represent characters who are defined by their clothes, which have the ability to transform bodies and stories, since «it is clothes that wear us and not we them» (WOOLF 1973, 188).<sup>2</sup> In Ferrante's *Troubling Love*, each of the clothing items contributing to the narrative process is created with carefully tailored words, interlaced to fit every edge of the plot.

While the creative process is necessarily based on the author's inspiration, it also relies on the narrator's function, represented by the voice extending beyond the author's domain. The narrator is the carrier who has to deliver the story word by word, using the narrating voice as the thread that acquires a life of its own and is the fundamental component of the story's fabric. The novelist's imagination provides the materials necessary to the fabrication, as well as the possibility of rendering the original idea associated with the body to be draped. Although the source of all narrative materials can be traced back to the author's imaginative and intellectual intentions, the narrator is in turn empowered with the faculty to express a perspective and to manipulate the narrative elements, by combining and sewing them together before the reader's eyes. Delia's narrating

voice in *Troubling Love* transfers from the imagination to the contiguous sphere of unreliable memory, where reminiscence blends almost indistinguishably with imagination. Similarly, in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, «a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends» holds the fragments to which the biographer or the narrator has to give an order, and «the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that» (WOOLF 1973, 78).

The semi-naked dead body of Delia's mother, Amalia, clearly denotes an elaborate storyline, yet it resists all efforts of containment by means of narrative wear. Clothes represent not only the form that the story takes, but they are also a prevalent topic of *Troubling Love*, where part of the communication among characters happens through exchanges of new and old clothes, fabrics, canvas and lingerie. On the one hand, the new items are bare frames with no stories to tell; they are empty fabric without traces of memory. Still, they appear to be permeable to uncontrollable bodily fluids, as unconscious triggers of the past, able to threaten any potential narrative consistency. On the other hand, the old garments retain the smell and marks of time in each of their strands, which are all discursive elements: old but carefully mended bed sheets; noticeably worn-out garments; old-fashioned rags that would deter men's attention and prevent the jealousy of Amalia's husband; shapeless brassieres, contrasting with the embroidered, new one, sole initial clue found on her dead body and still smelling as if it had been just taken from the sore of the Vossi sisters, the elegant lingerie store where it was unthinkable that Amalia would ever buy anything. Nonetheless, the old clothes are the inspiration for imagined ventures and inconsistent memories, and the object of desire and obsessions. Their yellowish colors are as faded as the hazy setting of their stories, whose blurry lines transpire in the novel's pages, while the folds and wrinkles of their fabric hide untold stories, sketching the impervious course that the narration has to undertake. The symbolism of these clothes is evident in the swapping and transfers from one character to the other, and especially in the exchanges between mother and daughter.

In spite of her expectation to feel relieved because she is finally separated by death from her mother's body, Delia feels instead the weight of a story to be told that has transferred to her own body. Against her will, her most intimate forces are driven by the effects of a compulsory flow. After the funeral, the relief from both the concern for her mother and the weight of the coffin she insists on carrying is combined with a sense of culpability. The uneasiness of Delia's repressed femininity becomes manifest. The linkage with her mother's body would necessarily persist, regardless of the resolution of distancing herself as much as possible from Amalia who, on the contrary, was never able to repress her femininity. Doubt arises about Delia's ability to be in control of her own body, once the body of her mother no longer interferes since, deprived of life, it no longer represents the rejected model, unbearable while alive.

Quando la bara era stata deposta nel carro e questo si era avviato, erano bastati pochi passi e un sollievo colpevole perché la tensione precipitasse in quel fiotto segreto del ventre. Il liquido caldo che usciva da me senza che lo volessi mi diede l'impressione di un segnale convenuto tra estranei dentro il mio corpo (FERRANTE 1999, 16).<sup>3</sup>

By tracing the clues provided by the clothes she had found, and wearing them whenever possible, Delia navigates through recollection of past episodes of domestic violence. She is eventually willing and ready to follow the hints of the memory's leaking, which unsurprisingly lead to a world that can not be completely obliterated, due to all the physical and psychological connections that still exist. In need of telling the story essentially to herself while narrating, Delia senses the stink of burned fabrics again, from the time when Amalia used to accept and to wear the dresses received as gifts by the family friend Caserta, without fearing her husband's predictably furious reactions. As the narrator, Delia proceeds through the account by stitching scraps and sewing images together, as they emerge from her character's visceral, rather than intellectual or even imaginative revisiting of her childhood and adolescence. The narrative fibre loses its texture, just as the threadbare clothes do, and runs almost spontaneously, turned into liquid form, just as the body fluids do on different occasions.<sup>4</sup> Intuition is paired throughout the whole novel with a visceral feeling, a combination of sources that clearly defines such a captivating narrative style

that is so characteristic of Ferrante's work.

The unfolding process is an effort to come to terms with the character of Amalia, whose very substance remains unreachable, yet all other characters, including Delia, charge Amalia with the responsibility of bearing

che mia madre portasse inscritta nel corpo una colpevolezza naturale, indipendente dalla sua volontà e da ciò che realmente faceva, pronta ad apparire all'occorrenza in ogni gesto, in ogni sospiro (FERRANTE 1999, 55).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a «natural guilt» seems to suggest that the existence of her body alone makes Amalia blameworthy, no matter how she acts. The simple reality of her body evinced a potential for self-governing, intolerable to both the possessive husband and the resentful young daughter. Delia's perception appears to be quite intricate, especially when associated with her father's perverseness: not only did she disapprove of her mother's behavior, but at the same time she was also able to understand her father's thoughts and to foresee his reaction. In the aftermath of her mother's death, Delia realizes how, as a child, she used to identify her own apprehension with her father's suspiciousness, and unconsciously justified his brutal response, because his obsession paradoxically coincided with her own jealousy, particularly exacerbated during her mother's absences. Delia envisions in many passages how Amalia used to behave when she was out of the house, eluding the implied rules of domestic boundaries and appropriate clothing. In Delia's imagination, her mother felt free to use her body as she wished, making it noticeable, and exposing herself to possible dangers. These alleged behaviors are the same that Amalia's husband had questioned, and are even transferred to Amalia's own imagination. In the man's view, Amalia was fully aware of what she would become and how she would look to other men when out of his sight; she had longed to be the uninhibited woman he would never tolerate to have as his wife:

come s'era immaginato che si comportasse sua moglie appena lui girava le spalle, come anche Amalia forse aveva fantasticato per tutta la vita di comportarsi: una signora di mondo che si curva senza essere costretta a poggiare due dita al centro della scollatura, accavalla le gambe non badando alla gonna, ride sguaiata, si copre d'oggetti preziosi e deborda con tutto il corpo in continue indiscriminate profferte sessuali, giostrando a tu per tu coi maschi nell'arena dell'osceno (FERRANTE 1999, 69).<sup>6</sup>

Once Delia acknowledges the fictitious nature of these mental constructions, it becomes problematic to replace them with a new version of the facts, as the process requires reopening old wounds and facing the senseless, tragic damage that both Amalia and Delia have experienced. As Laura Benedetti says, Delia realizes that her attitude «is linked to her incapacity to deal with her relationship with Amalia, to find a middle ground between identification and rejection» (BENEDETTI 2007, 106). Indeed, Amalia's story remains as uncertain as the dresses she actually wore, beyond the fantasies of others. Delia's pieces of memories remain too incongruous to be matched and basted together.

## 2. *Threats of laceration and amorphousness*

The painful compilation of events occurring within a fragmented frame has to deal with loss, emptiness, ruptures, as the effects produced by the sense of “frantumaglia”, a term that Elena Ferrante loads with meanings, using it especially with reference to her own mother. The word describes the mental and physical state resulting from the impression of being pulled by contradictory thoughts and heterogeneous, painful emotions. The author explains the sentiment of loss that marks this condition in one of the letters that, along with notes and answers to interviews, form the volume titled, in fact, *La frantumaglia*. Ferrante defines the term as

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 (FERRANTE 2003, 126).<sup>7</sup>

The “frantumaglia” has to do with the perception of both the individual and the universal crumbling of meanings as experienced by a woman who is wounded. In some cases, it may eventually become the reason for resolving to lift up the pieces and rearranging them back together by mending the fragments that still hold some life. It is also worth mentioning that Ferrante dedicates many pages of *La frantumaglia* to her fascination with the work of her mother, a seamstress like Amalia, which is likely to be an autobiographical element of *Troubling Love*. As Elda Buonanno Foley points out, the “frantumaglia” is a struggle that is common

to many women who are «in search of the antidotes to bear sorrow, death, loss, delusion, and the heaviness of life» (BUONANNO FOLEY 2011, 158). Delia is joined in her quest by other female narrators and protagonists of Ferrante's novels, such as Olga in *The Days of Abandonment* and Leda in *The Lost Daughter*.

This “frantumaglia” is the “disease” that afflicts Ferrante's protagonists, it is the filter through which they make sense of the world, it is the main cause of their alienation. Their struggles (and their representations) may appear an overly-discussed cliché, at times making these women pathetic and boring, but the author's language calls forth profound interior discomfort in female readers, who experience guilt and sympathy at the same time, a kinship with an author they barely know (BUONANNO FOLEY 2011, 158).

As the voice that expresses such a distress, Delia has to confront the possibility of collapsing, and has also to deal with the constant risk of losing control over the form and content of the story she wants to reconstruct, a risk that could result in her losing awareness as the narrator, shrinking her role to merely embody the wandering condition of a bewildered character. This feeling would suppress surveillance, or “sorveglianza”, the term Ferrante uses to define self-consciousness and one's perception of life, a much-needed mechanism for survival by resistance to breakdowns. Yet, as Elizabeth Alsop mentions, the weight of surveillance in the narration serves as a balancing pressure that has to constantly reestablish endurance against «a marked fascination with the theme of collapse – with the moments in which such systems of surveillance falter, or even fail» (ALSOP 2014, 466-67). Episodes of attraction toward failure and, to a greater extent, toward death, alternate with surveillance, resulting in consciousness of such fascination, resistance and eventually fight against it. It is within this conflict between attraction to downfall and avoidance that the narration unfolds. Surveillance creates self-control for both the character's psychology and the narrator's ability to detach and keep distance from the character. It produces meaningful words that give consistency and form to the narrative, unlike the ungovernable fluidity resulting from impulse, which may become as destructive as it is mesmerizing. To avoid chaos, the narrative has to rely on surveillance, the best protection from amorphousness. In Elena Ferrante's subsequent novels, the manifestation of amorphousness is called “smarginatura”, a term that conveys

the loss of discernible margins. The character of Lila perceives the dissolution and disappearance of the margins that delimit objects, people and other bodies in different pages of *The Neapolitan Novels*. For instance, in *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila refers to dissolving outlines as both a personal and cosmic rupture,

come se in una notte di luna piena sul mare, una massa nerissima di temporale avanzasse per il cielo, ingoiasse ogni chiarore, logorasse la circonferenza del cerchio lunare e sformasse il disco lucente riducendolo alla sua vera natura di grezza materia insensata (FERRANTE 2011b, 172).<sup>8</sup>

The “smarginatura” is the vanishing of all contours and forms that melt into magma, a mental process of deconstruction that returns orderly reality to chaos. It may be the extreme consequence of the sense of “frantumaglia”, as experienced by some of Ferrante’s female characters through their perception of the fragility of reality. Disintegration appears likely to happen before their very eyes, particularly when violence, distress and the mortification of their own nature are part of everyday life. Delia knows about Amalia’s striving to endure all the abuses inflicted on her. To resist abuse, Amalia had resolved to almost disregard them, even when physically assaulted.

Delia’s perceptions, distorted by fear of abandonment and a failed identification with her mother, blend with the attempts by two male characters to tailor Amalia’s narrative in the name of their troubled love, which becomes manifest in different ways. One attempt is Caserta’s fetishism, a ritual observed even after the disappearance of the body to which the old, desired lingerie belonged. A second one is the abusive husband’s fixation with owning – even authoring – her uncontainable body, by restraining it on the canvas he obsessively paints. Violence is fomented by the combination of his jealousy and Caserta’s vicious games. The paintings are the husband’s only view of Amalia, always the same and continually reproduced: a half-dressed body that he considers his private property, all the while disclosing it to the eyes of all. The canvases are pieces of fabric, too, although of a different type, forcing Amalia into her husband’s interpretation of her story. Only one of the paintings mentioned in the novel is different from the others, one representing the profiles of two women that almost overlap in the Vossi lingerie store. Delia, however, does not believe

her father capable of such a refined composition that, unlike his vulgar portraits, reflects a clearly articulated idea.

The temporal order is often altered in the narration. In life, the presence of Amalia could singlehandedly accelerate time, as the lack of continuity between the mother's and the daughter's lives caused the vacuum of the present, a condition comparable to a suspended hiatus between past and future. In Delia's independent life as an adult, Amalia's visits interfere with her new self-contained domain and lead Delia to picture herself as an old, wrinkled child. Their contrasting lifestyles, cities and languages emphasize the distance established between mother and daughter. Delia has chosen to live far from her native Naples, which, in addition to representing southern disarray, is unique in its expression of decay in the novel. In Turin, conventionally considered a rather composed northern city, Delia can avoid social relationships and close contact with the neighborhood. She does not tolerate Amalia's conduct during the days spent together in Turin:

La sua socievolezza mi infastidiva: usciva a fare la spesa e familiarizzava con negozianti con cui in dieci anni avevo scambiato non più di due parole; andava a passeggio per la città con certe sue conoscenze occasionali (FERRANTE 1999, 10).<sup>9</sup>

Within the limits of the private space, conversely, Amalia has the habit of devoting a considerable amount of time to cleaning the house in order to achieve a flawless tidiness; Delia subsequently returns her rooms to disorder as soon as Amalia leaves. Another rejection of Naples appears in Delia's use of Italian, expressly leaving her mother's Neapolitan behind. Occasional contact with Amalia's world, however, causes her to revert to the abhorred tongue that drags its heavy weight of tough memories and furious sounds.

The intrusion of the past, which happens with Amalia's visits, takes many different forms; however it appears most notably in the chronological confusion due to Delia's fears of proximity and juxtaposition when she sees herself as a young child with her body all wrinkled. Because she does not accept any presence of Amalia in her current life, she can only conceive their relation in the past, until the interruption of their shared storyline because of relocation. The linear chronology collides with the distance, and this physical rift is in turn embodied

by the wrinkles that engrave time on her skin. The marker of time recalls an analogous image found in the novel *Colomba* by Dacia Maraini: «una bambina con la faccia tutta rugosa» (MARAINI 2007, 252). In both cases, the wrinkles refer to the breach of time opened by a narrative absence that disrupts the connection between a mother and her daughter. In *Colomba*, the emblematic child recurrently asks her mother to tell a story. As soon as the storytelling stops, she sees time senselessly speeding, hair turning grey before her eyes. Immediately, she urges her mother to continue narrating because only tales have the power of detaining time: «Mamma, ti prego, svegliami, sto sognando che sto crescendo e che tu stai diventando sempre più vecchia. Ti prego, raccontami una storia! Solo le storie fermano il tempo» (MARAINI 2007, 294).<sup>10</sup> Whereas in Maraini's text the daughter remains a child as long as her mother sits on her bed telling stories, in Ferrante's text the adult daughter curls her body in a corner of the bed to avoid contact with her mother and to prevent turning into an aged, wizened child. In both texts, though, not only does the mother-daughter relation refer to their bodies; it is also inextricably intertwined with time. The stories told by mothers seem to bring messages handed down from generation to generation, delivered in the form of a narrative to be continued, whereas the stories told by daughters may be the quest for a narrative that the mother has been able to transmit only in a cryptic format that needs to be deciphered. Whether the stories are told by the mother or the daughter, they are always about the time between them, as either a reiteration or an interruption of a narrative body.

Behind Delia's resolute denial of the language, the city and the body of her mother, there is her complete inability to connect with Amalia's story. After Amalia's death, however, the basis of the refusal disappears, leaving the tear visibly open and in need of being patched. This repair may only occur if Delia finds the thread of the potential storyline in the foggy memories, bringing back the story that happened but was too painful for the mother to tell and now can only be told by the daughter. The dissociation between mother and daughter yields to an intimate game of overlaying images and clothes, eventually resulting in a sort of restored connection that fills the gaps of time and space between the

two women. However, the continuity remains as imperfect as the verb tense chosen to describe it and as the very setting of memory: «L'infanzia è una fabbrica di menzogne che durano all'imperfetto» (FERRANTE 1999, 160).<sup>11</sup> The past tense mentioned in this passage and used by Elena Ferrante in many pages of the original text is, in fact, the “imperfetto”, a tense that lacks any sense of completeness, giving actions an indefinite tone. It has rightly been translated as «past tense» by Ferrante's superb translator Ann Goldstein; however, it is a form of past tense that does not have an equivalent in English grammar, so that the translation cannot possibly communicate the linguistic implications of the original Italian tense. The memories recollected and all actions associated with the places revisited assume, in fact, an oneiric dimension in which the verb form used corresponds to the possible unreliability of the memories. The Italian “tempo imperfetto” can mean both “imperfect tense” and “imperfect time”, and this ambiguity underscores the grammatical, semantic and symbolic equivalence of the two concepts in the narrator's recounting. Delia's reminiscences embrace altogether different connotations that such a tense may bear: they refer to what her life used to be, to the habits of her family members, to the deeds that her mother repeatedly performed (for instance, when sewing), as well as to her own emotions, sensitivity and fantasies as a child. In sum, Delia has to tell the story to herself, setting it amid the memories of what she had perceived, and expressing it in the storytelling tense of both remembrances and imagination. She has to reconcile at least three different stories, told through the eyes of the child, the mother, and the adult daughter, by eliminating contradictions and trimming superfluities.

With such an insubstantial elusiveness, the narrator gropes among bodiless clothes and accumulated assumptions, in a composition of stories that she remembers or imagines. Delia confronts these ambiguities by envisioning herself as the armed woman from Neapolitan cards, the eight of spades, equipped as a warrior in a game of men, and ready to risk by playing with determination the only chance she has in her hands. She has to disengage from her father's moves in order to shift into her mother's mind to gain her version of the story. To

do so, Delia goes back to the places Amalia visited, and looks for plausible answers beyond what she had imagined a long time ago. Unpleasant sounds and depraved behavior become acceptable, as they are naturally consonant with the urban deterioration, the malodorous passages, and the dark underworld of the subway station where she descends. They provide the context but not the text, which is instead found in the bits of stories that Delia eventually remembers hearing directly from Amalia's voice: the forgotten accounts that the mother disclosed rarely.

Mi correva nella testa. Era possibile che io stessi passando di là portandola dentro il mio corpo invecchiato così impropriamente vestito? Era possibile che il suo corpo di sedicenne, vestito d'una veste a fiori fatta in casa, passasse per la penombra servendosi del mio [...]? Forse, alla fine, di quei due giorni senza tregua importava solo il trapianto del racconto da una testa all'altra, come un organo sano che mia madre mi avesse ceduto per affetto (FERRANTE 1999, 132-33).<sup>12</sup>

Suddenly, the images of mother and daughter in their loud dresses overlap intermittently, and the narrative threads seem to converge when Delia crosses the hidden streets of her past, through which a very young Amalia used to pass in order to deliver the gloves she made, and, constantly chased by harassers, would run to bring her body out of sight.

### 3. *The blue shielding suit*

The darkest haunt of the past is gradually illuminated by feeble gleams, filled with memories, and inhabited by Amalia's old garments, among them ultimately her blue suit. However, the possibility of re-dressing Amalia by returning that suit to her turns out to be illusory; the matching jacket and skirt are nothing more than silhouettes, hanging as if the body inside them had slipped out leaving its outline, and giving an incorporeal shape to the empty figure. To avoid losing herself, Delia descends into the hell of her most impenetrable memory in search of a residual sign of Amalia's substance. She has to mentally deconstruct the armored suit that represents Amalia's entire story, engraved in the blue fabric that has resisted time and countless adjustments. She has to connect the suit to actions and events, to place it within space and time frames, in order to subsequently re-assemble it, by emulating her mother's ability to bast, to sew, to

unstitch, to turn inside-out, to re-sew. Expert seamstresses are able to create an outfit that can last forever, if they can renew it over and over again. Sitting on the bed as if ready for the storytelling to happen by itself, Delia stares at the silhouettes to read Amalia's story encrypted in the suits. The narration itself takes the form of the art of sewing, although backwards:

Lasciai che ogni punto si scuicisse, che la stoffa blu ridiventasse tessuto senza taglio, odoroso di nuovo, nemmeno sfiorato da Amalia che, giovane, [...] stava ancora scegliendo tra le pezze arrotolate [...] Stava ancora progettando di cucirselo addosso (FERRANTE 1999, 153-54).<sup>13</sup>

Again, it is interesting to notice how the Italian expression «cucirselo addosso», translated as «to sew it herself» by Goldstein, is extremely difficult to render in English: its literal translation – *to sew it on herself* – has a special meaning in the original Italian, beyond the reflexive form. The idiomatic expression 'cucire addosso' is actually ambivalent: it suggests the act of modeling the pieces of fabric by putting them in direct contact with the body to accurately reproduce it. It also means to assign certain features with the intention of either criticizing someone or fabricating a character. In the letter written for the jury of the Elsa Morante prize in 1992, Elena Ferrante uses another similar expression belonging to the same semantic field, 'tagliare addosso', which may be translated as 'to cut to fit' or, more literally, 'to cut on somebody'. That year, *Troubling Love* won the prize named after Elsa Morante, possibly one of Elena Ferrante's intellectual mothers.<sup>14</sup> At the award ceremony, someone else read the letter, which was included in *La frantumaglia* later on. Its subject is particularly relevant because Ferrante quotes Morante's words from *Lo scialle andaluso* (FERRANTE 2003, 15-17) about seamstresses who dress mothers. The idea is that a mother's body is not the equivalent of a woman's body, in the eyes of her children and everyone else, including seamstresses. These dressmakers cut the fabric in order to fit the archetype, and create shapeless dresses for the amorphous mothers who will inhabit them. In Morante's short story, the protagonist Giuditta wears extravagant clothes both on stage and in the fantasies of her son Andrea. However, she changes into a black suit and a hat with veil once she is forced to leave her career and becomes an aging mother. The final unpretentious outfit is

ultimately appropriate for the role that her jealous son expects her to perform.

As the narrator of Woolf's *Orlando* says of clothes, «we may make them take the mould of arm or breasts, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking» (WOOLF 1973, 188). The cutting and sewing of the seamstress can produce dresses that hide the body, but can also reveal the true body; they can build a protection (or a self-protection), and can even craft a new persona and her story. The dresses made by Amalia represent as many possibilities as the imagination can allow. On the one hand, in the whole process of sewing her own dress, Amalia is telling about herself, starting from the very beginning; on the other hand, Delia is interpreting the suit's life according to her own versions, as a young girl who has witnessed the entire process and, fascinated, has developed parallel creations:

Mi incantava che da ordito e trama del tessuto lei sapesse ricavare una persona, una maschera che si nutriva di tepore e odore, che pareva figura, teatro, racconto. Se lei non mi aveva mai concesso nemmeno di sfiorarla, quella sua sagoma era stata certamente, fino alle soglie della mia adolescenzaa, generosa di suggestioni, di immagini, di piaceri. Il tailleur era vivo (FERRANTE 1999, 154).<sup>15</sup>

The suit preserves Amalia's desire for freedom that both attracts and terrorizes Delia, for the escape it would inspire, and for the distancing it would cause. The characters created, however, leave the true Amalia unknown, as in a Pirandellian situation, where female characters are particularly representative of alienation, exclusion and fragmentation, and are subjected to denial of will and form.<sup>16</sup> The fluidity inherent in the state of amorphousness is overcome by the reconstruction of the woman's contour behind the mask, although the process is described by a succession of terms expressing doubt. Only the word «maybe» (*forse*) recurs ten times in three pages, (FERRANTE 2006b, 126-28) in the final passages. Delia eventually recovers a patched equilibrium through tentative reconstruction of events, barely adjusting herself into Amalia's old garments that have resisted violence, manipulation and imposition of forms, whereas no clothes or narratives can suit or contain the true Amalia. Memories re-emerge for Delia, although uncertain; facts take shape, although blurred and burdened by the weight of long-lasting lies that keep Amalia unreachable. Delia resolves to tell everything she can

to herself, as there must be some truth among the lies deriving from her own obsessive game, as a child, of identifying with her mother to the point of *being* her mother: «Ero identica a lei e tuttavia soffrivo per l'incompiutezza di quell'identità. Riuscivamo a essere 'io' solo nel gioco, ormai, e lo sapevo» (FERRANTE 1999, 161).<sup>17</sup> Delia has to come to terms and be satisfied with that double represented by the empty old blue suit, the only garment to which she can cling. In fact, she resolves to wear it in order to return it to her mother's intentions, considering the suit to be the final synthesis of her inheritance: the extreme narrative left to her.

The adjustment of the skirt using a diaper pin and the adaptation of both the jacket and skirt to her body are part of the progression toward Delia's recognition of the need for artifice in telling the story: «bastava tirare un filo per seguitare a giocare con la figura misteriosa di mia madre, ora arricchendola, ora umiliandola. Ma mi accorsi che non ne sentivo più la necessità» (FERRANTE 1999, 165).<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Delia recognizes the destructive potential of that game, which coincides with manipulation as a feature of the narrative deed, due to the power inherent to creating a plot. As the daughter-narrator, Delia is no longer able to control the plot, because she is certainly not in control of Amalia's character, even less she is able to engage in the risky, perhaps impossible venture of becoming Amalia's narrative voice. The inability to complete the overlapping and reach absolute identification results in the essential admission of the ancient pain originated by detachment from the maternal body, loved and hated at the same time for having first (re)produced and then abandoned her double, a potential replica or at least an extension of her life and true self, a daughter who is instead «[...] lasciata nel mondo a giocare da sola con le parole della menzogna, senza misura, senza verità» (FERRANTE 1999, 164).<sup>19</sup> With no chances of resuming her mother's narrative, Delia is forced to resort to the few remaining signs that still tell about Amalia: an inherited story lying in an adapted suit, barely fastened with a safety pin, and a retouched picture found in her mother's old purse. Retouching is all she can do to her own picture, as well, so that the images of the two women become equivalent. A picture, the fictitious representation of a double in itself, is

even more emblematic in this case, because it is the photo found on the identity card. The symbolism pushes both fiction and reality toward the psychological territory of construction and deconstruction of the self. The complexity intrinsic to the semantic value of “identity” is evident here. Although the term usually refers to the individuality, it actually means ‘being identical’. Delia’s and Amalia’s identity cards and pictures become interchangeable, as do the people who hold them, only by altering difference through artifice and a manipulation of images, analogous to the adjustment of the blue suit. Paradoxically, identity is allowed only within alteration, which literally enables transformation into other. Being identical is reached by being different.

The emptiness between the two women is eventually filled by a continuity that must necessarily be imperfect. Delia has speculated about Amalia’s invention of her own story every time her mother played with her scissors to design body parts made out of paper and fabric, or with her needles and sewing machine to create empty pieces of clothes with a life of their own. Nevertheless, before drowning, Amalia expresses a fear of being taken away wrapped in a rug, an image that suggests total imprisonment in a kind of fabric that would have put an end to her games of stitching, unstitching and re-stitching. Delia recounts how her mother felt her own tearing and slipping away, an image that recurs in many forms and different contexts in the novel, for instance in the frequent references to rips in garments, lacerations of the body, the surfaces and the urban fabric, as well as ruptures of the temporal order. Delia can only wish to be able to look through those slits, which are the result of suffering but also potential revelations of the reality beyond the facade. Similarly, the tearing of Amalia’s self is at the same time a rupture of her resistance and an opening suggesting, like Eugenio Montale’s flaw in the net,<sup>20</sup> a slot through which it is possible to escape and, essentially, to vanish. The theme is significant in Ferrante’s work, particularly in the final volume of the *Neapolitan Novels*, where vanishing frees both Lila and her young daughter from narrative constrictions.

When asked whether Amalia’s disappearance is an act of surrender or not in an interview published by *Paris Review*, Elena Ferrante responds with another

«maybe», a sign of surrender, she says, but also one of irreducibility against manipulation of personality (FERRANTE 2015, 226). Delia acquires consciousness of both amorphousness and irreducibility, as the effects of the different forms of manipulation that are expressions of troubling love.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> In his *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Mario Vargas Llosa says: «Writing novels is the equivalent of what professional strippers do when they take off their clothes and exhibit their naked bodies on stage. The novelist performs the same acts in reverse. In constructing the novel, he goes through the motions of getting dressed, hiding the nudity in which he began under heavy, multicolored articles of clothing conjured up out of his imagination. The process is so complex and exacting that many times not even the author is able to identify in the finished product — that exuberant display of his ability to invent imaginary people and worlds — the images lurking in his memory, fixed there by life, which sparked his imagination, spurred him on, and induced him to produce his story» (VARGAS LLOSA 2002, 16).
- <sup>2</sup> In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf also treats gender and the body in society and in fiction. However, it is in *Orlando* that clothing acquires the function of defining the body.
- <sup>3</sup> Translation in English: «When the coffin was set down in the hearse, and it had started off, a few steps and a guilty relief were enough for the tension to release that hidden stream from my womb. The warm liquid that was coming out of me against my will gave me the impression of an agreed-upon signal among aliens inside my body» (FERRANTE 2006 b, 17).
- <sup>4</sup> The function of disgust in Ferrante's work is analyzed by Stilian Milkova in her essay *Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante's La figlia oscura* (MILKOVA 2013).
- <sup>5</sup> Translation in English: «inscribed in her body a natural guilt, independent of her will and of what she really did, and yet readily appearing as needed in every gesture, in every breath» (FERRANTE 2006 b, 47).
- <sup>6</sup> Translation in English: [...] the way he imagined his wife behaved as soon as he turned his back, the way Amalia, too, perhaps, had for her whole life dreamed of behaving: a woman of the world who bends over without having to place two fingers at the center of her neckline, crosses her legs without worrying about her skirt, laughs coarsely, covers herself with costly objects, her whole body brimming with indiscriminate sexual offerings, ready to joust face to face with men in the arena of the obscene (FERRANTE 2006 b, 58).
- <sup>7</sup> My English translation of the passage from the volume *La frantumaglia*: «The *frantumaglia* is the deposit of time without the order of a story, of a tale. The *frantumaglia* is the effect of the sense of loss, when one has the certainty that all that seems to be stable, lasting, an anchorage for our life, will soon go to join that landscape of debris that we think we see.»
- <sup>8</sup> Translation in English: «as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon's circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, reducing it to its true nature of rough insensate material» (FERRANTE 2012, 176).
- <sup>9</sup> Translation in English: «Her sociability irritated me: she went shopping and got to know shopkeepers with whom in ten years I had exchanged no more than a word or two; she took walks through the city with casual acquaintances» (FERRANTE 2006b, 11).
- <sup>10</sup> My translation of the two quotations from *Colomba*: «A child with her face all wrinkled» (MARAINI 2007, 252). «I beg you, mom, wake me up, I am dreaming that I am growing up and you are getting older and older. I beg you, tell me a story! Only stories stop time» (MARAINI 2007, 294).
- <sup>11</sup> Translation in English: « Childhood is a tissue of lies that endure in the past tense» (FERRANTE 2006b, 130).
- <sup>12</sup> Translation in English: «She ran in my head. Was it possible that I, passing through there, carried her in my aging, unsuitably dressed body? Was it possible that her sixteen-year-old body, in a homemade flowered dress, was passing through the shadowy light by means of mine [...]? Maybe, in the end, all that mattered of these two days without respite was the transplanting of the story from one head to the other, like a healthy organ that my mother had given up to me out of affection» (FERRANTE 2006b, 108-09).
- <sup>13</sup> Translation in English: «I let each stitch become unsewed, the blue material become again the uncut fabric, smelling like new, not even touched by Amalia, who, a young girl [...], was still

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choosing among the bolts of material [...] She was still planning to sew it herself» (FERRANTE 2006b, 125).

<sup>14</sup> Stefania Lucamante writes of women novelists who, in their works, always play with their literary mother's body, and considers Elsa Morante as the literary mother of Italian writers Di Lascia, Vinci and Ferrante (LUCAMANTE 2008, 28).

<sup>15</sup> Translation in English: «I was enthralled by her ability to extract a person from the woof and warp of the fabric, a mask that was nourished on warmth and scent, which seemed character, theater, story. Even if she had never let me touch it, that silhouette of hers had certainly been, up to the threshold of my adolescence, generous with suggestions, images, pleasures. The suit was alive» (FERRANTE 2006b, 126).

<sup>16</sup> One example is Marta in Luigi Pirandello's novel *The Excluded Woman*.

<sup>17</sup> Translation in English: «I was identical to her and yet I suffered because of the incompleteness of that identity. We succeeded in being 'I' only in the game now, and I knew it» (FERRANTE 2006b, 131).

<sup>18</sup> Translation in English: «it was enough to pull one thread to go on playing with the mysterious figure of my mother, now enriching it, now humiliating it. But I realized that I no longer felt the need (FERRANTE 2006b, 134-35).

<sup>19</sup> Translation in English: «left in the world to play alone with the words of a lie, without limits, without truth» (FERRANTE 2006b, 133).

<sup>20</sup> The reference is to the poem *In limine (On the Threshold)* (MONTALE 1999, 5).

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