STILIANA MILKOVA ROUSSEVA: Elena Ferrante as World Literature
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Elena Ferrante as World Literature is the first English-language monograph focused on the renowned Italian author. Across five chapters and an epilogue, Stiliana Milkova Rousseva, an established Ferrante scholar and professor of comparative literature at Oberlin College, unfolds a comprehensively researched, analytically rich, and imaginatively stimulating interlocution not only with Ferrante's most popular Neapolitan novels (Eng. trans. *My Brilliant Friend*, 2012; *The Story of a New Name*, 2013; *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 2014; and *The Story of the Lost Child*, 2015) but also with her three shorter novels, her children's book, and *La frantumaglia* (2003; Eng. trans. *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, 2016), a collection of various texts. The monograph engages with multiple dimensions of Ferrante's writing: from anonymity as resistance to marketing demands, media pressures, and social expectations (Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym) to female subalternity, art theory, and the attitude of wariness that permeates Italian literary criticism with regard to world literature. Milkova Rousseva's expertise in multiple literary traditions (Russian, Bulgarian, and Italian) and command of critical debates in feminist theory, trauma studies, and psychoanalysis enable her to foster a far-reaching comparative discourse, situating Ferrante's works within an intertextual network that exposes, in nuance, their local, global, and glocal concerns.

Milkova Rousseva's multifaceted discussion spans gender/ed authorship, topography, and politics with a focus on the figure of the mother and disgust as a psychosomatic reaction related to feminine experiences of pregnancy (44), insemination as a poisonous injection, and motherhood/birth as a corporal-psychological-spiritual fragmentation. To underscore and expose the inner workings of the last, she examines closely the dissolutions of chronological time that immerse characters and readers into temporal ambiguity and enable Ferrante to attend both to the "repressive past" and the "oppressive present" (57) at the same time. This foundational work is necessary for the construction of a female genealogy of selfhood, creativity, and authorship capable of operating as an alternative to conventional lineages designed to serve the beneficiaries of patriarchy. Thus, Milkova Rousseva both uncovers and constructs a capacious female genealogy embedded in Ferrante's works through intertextual references. Her scholarly breadth enables her to draw on a rich network that includes Elif Shafak, Rachel Cusk, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sibilla Aleramo, Natalia Ginzburg, Adriana Cavarero, Elizabet Grosz, Marina Abramović, Mara Cerri, and Cindy Sherman among others. Situating Ferrante's texts within numerous literary, theoretical, cultural, and historical contexts, Milkova Rousseva showcases an "intra-textual genealogy of women writers" (155) that runs across novels and between characters, historical figures, and mythological beings. Her accompanying readings of additional texts from the Italian literary tradition (Anna Banti's 1947 *Artemisia*, Elsa Morante's 1982 *Aracoeli*, and others) both illuminate and perform the female literary genealogy of which Ferrante is herself a part.

At the heart of *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* is the complex, multifaceted image of a universal feminine imaginary ("feminine experience, subjectivity, and identity", 22) brought forth in Ferrante's works out of what the author calls "the male cage" (126). In delineating the contours and contents of the image, the discussion vacillates among "female", "feminine", and "women's" as among bodies, languages/texts, and socio-political structures, practices, and regimes. The monograph refrains from sharply defining these terms.

While Isabella Pinto and Elisa Sotgiu have put Ferrante's work in conversation with Italian radical feminism, feminism of difference, and Marxist feminism, Stefania Lucamente has proposed that the tetralogy and Ferrante's disavowal of particular feminist influences in fact undoes feminism. Milkova Rousseva addresses these alternative conceptions through a careful unfolding of Ferrante's rich "tapestry of [feminist] theories, images, and scenarios reified in plot and character" (14). She comes closest to a conceptualization of Ferrante's feminism by drawing on Tiziana de Rogatis' "feminist storytelling" and, to a lesser extent, on James Wood's assessment of Ferrante's work as a kind of "practical *écriture feminine*". Ferrante's "literary syncretism" (14), Milkova Rousseva maintains, which is better suited to the reality of feminine experience and its narration, rests on the entanglement of often distant and even contradictory terms and theories, and bears theoretical significance for the feminine imaginary. To articulate its intricate, unsettling nature, Milkova Rousseva utilizes *La frantumaglia* as a map and foregrounds two key terms, *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura*, which center and guide the discussion across a rich thematic terrain. "To be afflicted with *frantumaglia* is to acknowledge – and submit to – the protocols of a universal patriarchy" (28), she explains. As a "theory of feminine experience" (29), *frantumaglia* is simultaneously the fragmentation, disintegration, and psychic and /or physical collapse of the female character as well as a way to account for the ways in which patriarchal structures and practices precipitate it. *Smarginatura*, on the other hand, is a symptom of *frantumaglia*, though the latter is "both the cause and the effect of suffering" (35), Milkova Rousseva observes, defying in this way not only causality but the expectation of causal identifiability and traceability to a single source.

In its boundary-destroying activity, *frantumaglia* disbands chronological time and language, opening characters to uncontrollable and sometimes explosive sensory experiences. Often, repressive surveillance methodologies inherited from male relatives result in cross-generational trauma that manifests as *frantumaglia*. Even a household run by two women in *The Lying Life of Adults* (2019), Milkova Rousseva notes, is dominated by the portrait of a male, surveilling and judging their every move inside the home and commanding subservience; "The two women's ostensibly feminine household is only another form of their subalternity", Milkova Rousseva writes (170). In her view, Ferrante's most arduous and valuable effort is not to expose disciplinary surveillance but rather to reveal how it can be transformed into a reflective kind of (self-) surveillance that confronts and subverts the patriarchal gaze when the internal surveyor is no longer (an internalized) male. This alternative surveillance, Milkova Rousseva argues, is frequently "collaborative, creative, and mutually constitutive" (59). Each central female character can become an opening into a female experience of suffering, into "the middle of a dizzy spell" (37) that makes possible both profoundly affective friendship and (self-) regeneration/reinvention. Through close reading of *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura* in Ferrante's writing, Milkova Rousseva articulates Ferrante's reconfiguration of subalternity into agency as a sustained endeavor to reclaim female genius, authorship, and creativity from its traditional association with maleness.

A significant amount of Milkova Rousseva's analytical attention is concentrated on

identifying the forms and patterns of subalternity in Ferrante's writing. Milkova Rousseva's insights regarding female liquidity, particularly Ferrante's use of bodily fluids to underscore the brutality of patriarchal society, map possibilities for positive mother–daughter relations, rooted in creativity, shared experience, and intuitive knowledge. Milkova Rousseva focuses on the ways in which these figures expose "the repressive and oppressive collective feminine unconscious" and redefine women's culturally instilled and adopted "raging, murderous, suicidal ancestors" (86). Her scholarly range sustains her nuanced observations regarding Ferrante's use of ancient Greek mythology and especially the persistent figure of the violent, suicidal woman/mother, enraged and seeking vengeance. This analysis makes legible a haunting archetype that can be traced to Mediterranean myth but retains an active potential to possess women today.

To the question of how characters resist and conquer oppressive structures, Ferrante's answer is via creativity – which Milkova Rousseva identifies in Ferrante's works as antithetical to motherhood – and especially through writing. Sewing and writing, cutting and narrating are aspects of "an introspective feminine practice" (33) that centers on the discourse of female experience. Milkova Rousseva repeatedly employs the term "conquer" to refer to its successful outcomes, though she perceptively and indirectly observes that the term has nothing to do with living happily ever after. In a sense, there is no final and definitive "conquest" but rather an ongoing self-reinvention, never fully severed from the possibility of self-loathing, madness, and death. Often such reinvention takes the form of women's becoming agents of "creative violence", as Milkova Rousseva puts it, which short-circuits "the power structures within the symbolic and reconfigure[s] the artistic act as a shared feminine process" (107), expressing the excluded creative female authorship. Milkova Rousseva notes that Ferrante exposes the assumed and often promoted assumption that education can set human beings free not merely as untrue but as pernicious through the feelings of failure and inadequacy that it produces in her highly educated characters. Education alone is insufficient, she points out, within a system that pits women's creative or intellectual work against an ideal of motherhood according to which a woman must commit to sacrificing her every desire to her children's needs and to homemaking.

Nevertheless, the maternal persists in Ferrante's daughter characters, in their responses to dialect, their complicated relations with their mothers, and their abjection, as shown in Milkova Rousseva's insightful analyses: "The dynamics of appearance and disappearance [of dolls, mothers, daughters, and female friends in Ferrante's texts], desire and disgust, attachment and detachment, are reinvigorated through a new conceptual paradigm. Mothers must be violated (lost, thrown in the cellar, rejected, repelled, abjected) before they can return and be reincorporated in the daughter's bodies and narratives" (86). Similarly, in order to subvert if not to escape the constitutive male gaze, women must descend into the violent underbellies of cities and memories; they must get lost among the architectural mechanisms that spatialize control in order to weave their own threads that will lead them out. Among the variety of interpretative possibilities that Ferrante proposes, Milkova Rousseva points to the powerful image of the interlinked sweaty hands of Lila and Lenù (the Neapolitan novels' main characters) which form a thread that defies the oppressive, ogre-like patriarchal structures and their implicit insistence that there is only one option – to submit, since there is no way out. Resisting neat interpretative solutions, Milkova Rousseva observes that Lila's character both defies (and defeats) the labyrinth and subsumes it within her own labyrinthine depths. Artist, architect, engineer, and builder at the same time, Lila is not unlike Neo, the main character of *The Matrix*, who, ultimately, infiltrates the system, becomes the matrix, and manipulates it from within.

In Chapter 5, "Mapping Urban Feminine Topographies", Milkova Rousseva studies Ferrante's spatial poetics, the ways in which "psyche is spatialized" and "topography is interiorized" (87). She delineates the perambulatory subjectivity-construction in Ferrante's texts, where women reconfigure themselves and the spaces they inhabit through walking and remembering. Milkova Rousseva maps Ferrante's efforts to articulate these male-oriented and dominated spaces that affect female characters in distinctly negative ways. Because city space in Ferrante's novels (the working-class *rione* or neighborhood especially) "embodies, enacts, and enforces the forms, rituals, and practices of patriarchal control" (133), Milkova Rousseva writes, to build a feminine city, "a female polis" (134), then, becomes an undertaking of critical importance.

Milkova Rousseva's subtle work with imagery and deft navigation of feminist theories bring forth analyses that reach far beyond the boundaries of a given text. An insightful instance is an intertextual reading of motherhood between Ferrante's literary iconography in *L'amore molesto* (1992; Eng. trans. *Troubling Love*, 2006) and a contemporaneous print, *Ste. Sebastienne* (1992), by Louise Bourgeois. Through its representation of Christian martyrdom, the latter offers a conception of motherhood as torturous, depleting, and capable of eradicating subjectivity. In an attempt to regain agency and authority over their own narratives, Ferrante's characters often respond with laughter as well as obscene gestures or movements. Milkova Rousseva examines Ferrante's attentiveness to socially expected and regulated female body movements and behavior vis-à-vis ways of breaking and subverting these expectations and normative regulations expressed through sonic poetics. She observes that the characters are frequently seamstresses or engaged in dress-making or dressing – cutting and suturing – skills and processes that are entwined with narrating and often with wresting narrative authority from the male-dominated or androgenic right to narrate. Lila, for instance, cuts herself out of family photographs (125), but what enables her to tell her story, Milkova Rousseva contends, is suturing as a "shared feminine gaze", a reciprocal gaze created by women that circumvents the male gaze completely (121–122). Against alternative readings (Lucamante's for instance), Milkova Rousseva convincingly shows that, in the tetralogy, Lila tells her story through her friend Lenù, which can be read as "Ferrante's theory *and* practice of feminine, friendship, creativity, and authorship" (129).

Elena Ferrante as World Literature offers much more than a probing examination of the works by the Italian author. The book is also an exploration of what Milkova Rousseva calls "the creation of Elena Ferrante" as a phenomenon of world literature in which translation plays a crucial part. Although the monograph does not redefine the concept of world literature, it offers a compelling illustration of David Damrosch's conception of the term – Ferrante's novels have not only circulated well beyond their local point of origin but have also gained in translation. Milkova Rousseva both contributes to and performs the shared foundation that the concept of world literature can provide for understanding texts that appear to stand in national, geographic, linguistic, or historical isolation.

What I appreciate especially about Milkova Rousseva's discussion is that it does not sterilize the subjects it addresses, from verbal incontinence to corporal fluids, or contain what is meant to be uncontainable in Ferrante's characters, namely their pluriform female subjectivity that is "somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual" (97). Milkova Rousseva does not shy away from the grotesque, the disgusting, and the profoundly unsettling; on the contrary, she makes them legible through the frameworks that she builds. I find Milkova Rousseva's ability to bring together readers (herself included), characters, and writer both skillful and thrilling. She astutely bridges the "fictional" and the "real", questioning their distinction and building a convincing case for the indispensable relevance of the former to

the latter. Through Ferrante's works, Milkova Rousseva offers a conception of identity constructed via suturing – the painstaking and sometimes perilous work with needle and thread – as a "collaborative, creative, and mutually constitutive" (59) endeavor. *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* is a relevant book today not only because misogyny, femicide, and backsliding democracies fortify existing borders but because it teaches the skills of traversing the boundaries that divide us.

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