‘CHOKING BETWEEN REPULSION AND DESIRE’: EXPLORING DISGUST IN ELENA FERRANTE’S *CRONACHE DEL MAL D’AMORE*.

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The work presented in this thesis is my own. To the best of my belief this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma of the university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made.
Signed: Giovanna Iozzi

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Abstract:

This creative writing PhD consists of two parts. The first part is a novel, ***Black Figs,*** which follows the experiences of a woman called El on holiday in Italy with her husband Tom and their children, Jake and new baby Sol. They are with another couple, long-time friends, Juno and Charlie (with whom El has been secretly infatuated with for years.) El is still recovering from the traumatic birth of Sol, ending up with a C-section, and we find her in a state of bleak anxiety, intense jealousy, as well as being convulsed with disgust at herself, her body, and those around her. Isolated and unravelling mentally, tension builds as El's skewed gaze and the repellent optics of her surroundings start to overwhelm her and propel her into violent fantasies and actions.

The second part is a critical commentary titled: **'Choking between repulsion and desire': exploring disgust in Elena Ferrante's *Cronache del mal d'amore*,** which explores disgust in the first three books written by Elena Ferrante known as the *Cronache del Mal d'Amore*. Feverish and disturbing, the short novels, *Troubling Love*, The *Days of Abandonment* and *The Lost Daughter* present intense first-person narrators, isolated and speaking from within the storm of their various crises. Whether they be daughters in mourning, abandoned wives or guilty mothers, they are all plagued by feelings of angry revulsion, at themselves, societal constraints, men, their mothers, their children, at their matrilineages and the Neapolitan dialect. Disgust manifests in various forms and signs forming ugly configurations of the repellent: body fluids, rotting fruit and dead insects. I attempt to show how Ferrante repurposes disgust from its typical associations as a loathed affect, into a more nuanced, expressive emotion, so it becomes a useful clarifying tool for self-examination, allowing her characters a rough passage out of their states of abjection.

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Part 2 - Critical Commentary: 'Choking between repulsion and desire': exploring disgust in Elena Ferrante's *Cronache del mal d'amore*.

INTRODUCTION

Elena Ferrante's first three novels, published collectively as the *Cronache del Mal d'Amore* [Chronicles of Heartache] (2012), feature female protagonists in crisis: isolated, beset by feelings of repulsion and abjection, messily attached to antagonistic mothers, enraged by derisive daughters, abandoned by partners and almost totally bereft of friends.[1] These early works differ markedly from the Neapolitan Quartet where the main characters Lila Grullo and Elena Greco are presented in relation to a network of others: friends, families, work colleagues and the wider communities of Naples.[2] By contrast, in *L'amore molesto* [Troubling Love] (1992), *I giorni dell'abbandono* [The Days of Abandonment] (2002) and *La figlia oscura [The Lost Daughter]* (2006), the protagonists Delia, Olga and Leda are outliers, to their community, to wider society, even to themselves at times.[3] These are characters in isolation, struggling against the possibility of psychical disintegration within a strictly patriarchal culture, in danger of shattering into the thematically linked states of being designated by

[1] Elena Ferrante, *Cronache del mal d'amore: L'amore molesto, I giorni dell'abbandono, La figlia oscura*, (Rome: Edizioni E/O, 2012)

[2] Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One:* trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012); Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name: Neapolitan Novels, Book Two*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2013); Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay: Neapolitan Novels, Book Three:* trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2014); Elena Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four:* trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015). The *Quartet* has sold around 20 million copies worldwide.

[3] All citations of the *Cronache* in English are taken from the following editions: Elena Ferrante, *Troubling Love*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), hereafter TL; Elena Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2006), hereafter DA; Elena Ferrante, *The Lost Daughter*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), hereafter LD. Page references are given in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

Ferrante's neologisms *smarginatura* (breaching/dissolving margins) and *frantumaglia* (an internal jumble of psychical fragments).[4] The protagonists of the *Cronache* 'are women who tell their story from the middle of a dizzy spell', writes Ferrante, characters narrating their lives from inside a vortex of chaos (Fr, 108).

Narrated by edgy, pugnacious characters in the first person, Ferrante's first novels could be accused of lacking the compellingly epic narrative sweep of the *Neapolitan Quartet*. Novella-like in length, and set over much shorter periods of time, they have a surreal, at times hallucinatory quality, and can read like psychological case studies rather than flowing narratives. But the reader is never closer to the rough intimacy of Ferrante's authorial voice and logic than in these early works. As the writer tracks her characters' radical, often illogical behaviours and streams of thought, she seems materially bound with their narratives. Referring to her first two books, Ferrante writes: '*Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment* seemed to me the ones that most decisively stuck a finger in certain wounds I have that are still infected and did so without keeping a safe distance' (Fr, 81). This lack of a safe distance between the author and her subjects, coupled with Ferrante's well-documented anonymity, her 'neurotic desire for intangibility', allows her to fuse with her work as if physically (Fr, 59). 'The labour of writing touches every point of the body. When the book is finished, it's as if you had been rudely searched,' she claims (Fr, 80). Of another writing project, she reveals: **'**I wrote this story because it has to do with me. I was inside it for a long time. I kept shortening the distance between the protagonist and me, *I occupied all her cavities* and there is nothing about her, today, that I wouldn't do' (Fr, 72) (my

[4] 'Frantumaglia' is a dialectical word attributed to the author's mother whom she describes as being sometimes 'racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart.' See Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (Europa Editions, 2016), p. 99; hereafter, Fr. Page references are given in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

emphasis). This auto-fictional quality or Ferrante's intense authorial proximity to her writing relates to the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero's idea of 'the narratable self', the desire to be narrated through the mouth of another.[5] Ferrante's book of musings, letters and interviews, *Frantumaglia* (referenced frequently in this thesis) is widely held to be a work of self-exegesis, offering not only a literary exploration of the author's works, but also, as the critic Stiliana Milkova suggests, consolidating 'the literary persona of the author "Elena Ferrante" by mapping her narrative poetics – images, tropes, settings, thematics – onto her biography and vice versa - inventing her biography as a map of her narrative poetics'.[6]

The intimacy between Ferrante and her work appears to be echoed by Ferrante's readers' encounters with her writing too. The physical world presented in the books seems to inspire a restless longing to see, smell and touch the places described**.** In *The Ferrante Letters* (2020), Sarah Chihaya describes the effects of Ferrante's 'uniquely palpable geographies' on the reader: 'We want – or at least I want – to go to […] Ferrante's Naples, because it feels as though we've already been there, and more, because we need to feel in our own bodies what the place makes us feel, its particular character and texture'.[7] She raises the fascinating idea that, perversely, our desire to travel to Ferrante's 'troubled' spaces is because we want to 'inhabit the bad feelings […] we get from a text', calling this a

[5] Isabella Pinto, Stiliana Milkova, and Adriana Cavarero, 'Storytelling Philosophy and Self Writing—Preliminary Notes on Elena Ferrante: An Interview with Adriana Cavarero', *Narrative*, Volume 28, (2020), pp. 236–249.
In the interview, Cavarero explains that the desire to be narrated from the mouth of another is essential for her concept of the 'narratable self' – 'The other woman is necessary for my story to be told. The meaning of the story consists also in the material operation of narrating the story that comes from the other woman' p.238*.* Cavarero's book, *Relating Narratives* explores the relationship between selfhood and narration, how narrative models in literature and philosophy can open up new ways of thinking about human identities. See Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[6] Stiliana Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature, Literatures as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 6.
[7] Sarah Chihaya, Merve Emre, Katherine Hill, Jill Richards, *The Ferrante Letters: An Experiment in Collective Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 69.

'strange kind of affective inhabitation […] worlds away from the reliquary amusement park delights of more conventional literary tourism'.[8]

I first encountered Ferrante's *Cronache books* after I began the short story which would develop into my novel *Black Figs*. Her narratives felt so immediately recognisable to me that I read them in a kind of fevered state. Ferrante's world, a febrile, violent, loud Naples, reminded me of 1980s childhood holidays in Calabria surrounded by similarly volatile southern Italian relatives. The men and fathers in her books are absent, neglectful, violent, while angry, anxious mothers take centre stage loudly and messily, mirroring my own family dynamics. As I read, I had the uncanny sensation that I was experiencing reflections of my own feelings, thoughts and reactions. Sally Rooney describes something similar when she first read Natalia Ginzburg's 1952 novel *All My Yesterdays: '*I felt as if I was reading something that had been written for me, something that had been written almost inside my own head or heart [...] It was as if her writing was a very important secret that I had been waiting all my life to discover'. [9]

Rooney's 'transformative encounter' with Ginzburg's work happened for me with Ferrante, whose influence continues to feed into my writing as her work reflects my own themes and narrative fixations. I was transfixed by the unusual relationship between the author and her stories; by probing the interior lives of her characters, she is exploring her own history too, mapping examining the past in a process of exhumation and inquiry, the self-exegesis referred to previously. Ferrante, famed for her closely guarded anonymity, imbues the reader with an interesting tension, creating the impression that the author is 'overwhelmingly present in her work'.[10] Her book on writing, *Frantumaglia,* was key to my

[8] Chihaya and others, *The Ferrante Letters*, p. 69.
[9] Natalia Ginzburg, *All Our Yesterdays*, trans. by Angus Davidson (London: Daunt Books, 2022), p. 4.
[10] Victor Zarour Zarzar 'To read against Ferrante – or alongside her?' *Public Books*, 2021

understanding of her novels too, invaluable as a literary road map to accompany her fiction; its autobiographical anecdotes, revelations and clues signposting and elucidating the motifs of the author's literary universe. Most fascinating to me was that the crises of Ferrante's characters resonated with themes in my own life, which then fed into those of my protagonists. El is suffocated by feelings of abjection and disgust, romantic disillusionment, a lapsed career, a need to disrupt and destroy maternal idealisation, intense jealousy and violent thoughts towards both men and her children.

Ferrante's obsessive focus on the body was also directly pertinent to my novel*:* her narratives dwell on female bodily processes, responses, functions and fluids, inevitably leading to manifestations of disgust, rage and physical trauma. In the *Cronache*, female characters react to the impositions of patriarchy with physical aggression and disgust, as does my protagonist El. The sheer force of Ferrante's authorial voice, her use of taboo-crossing details, the element of shock in her work that compels the reader to face the realities of female subordination, these elements informed my own creative output. Another key aspect of Ferrante's work which provided inspiration was the level of unequivocal anger she allows her characters, women driven into impulsive decisions by disgusted rage, even if aggression is still considered an inappropriate emotion for women.

Ferrante's early works are intense first-person narratives, stories indicating that she is fascinated by unconscious urges and drives. In the psychological dramas she depicts between mothers and daughters, the author shows traces and influences of her reading. Although she ultimately questions the 'ambivalent usefulness' of psychoanalytic theory, her writing can certainly be explored alongside theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray,

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< https://www.publicbooks.org/to-read-against-ferrante-or-alongside-her/ > (accessed 22 May, 2025)

Sigmund Freud, and Melanie Klein (Fr, 123). Ferrante confesses to having 'passionately' read both Klein and Freud, and writes that her first novel, *Troubling Love* was influenced by Freud's theories on girls' psychosexual development.[11] 'The very title of the book preserves traces of a passage of Freud's essay 'Female Sexuality' (1931) concerning the girl's pre-Oedipal phase' (Fr, 122). To some critics, Ferrante is figuratively encoding new ways of representing female experience through her work. James Wood suggests: 'Ferrante may never mention Hélène Cixous or French feminist literary theory, but her fiction is a kind of practical *écriture feminine'*.[12] There are clearly links between Ferrante's work and Luce Irigaray's plea for a reengagement with the symbolically severed maternal body, as well as Cixous' call for a new feminine, embodied way of thinking and writing in 'white ink'.[13] In *Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) Cixous famously urges that, 'Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes'.[14] All of these writers are in different ways trying to create new, feminine-centred structures of meaning, new genealogies, in a bid to separate from phallogocentric structures of language and thought.[15] Ferrante writes: 'We, all of us women, need to build a genealogy of our own, one that will embolden us, define us, allow us to see ourselves outside the tradition through which men have viewed, represented, evaluated and catalogued us – for millennia'(Fr, 361). Ferrante depicts the women she wants to see in

[11] 'During this time, the girl's father is only a troublesome rival.' Sigmund Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, new edn (London: Vintage Classics, 2005), p. 418.
[12] Wood, James, 'Women on the Verge,' *The New Yorker*, 2013 https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/women-on-the-verge> [accessed 29 January 2020]
[13] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), pp. 875–93 1(p. 881).
[14] Cixous,'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.886.
[15] Phallogocentrism, a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida, refers to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning. The word is a portmanteau of the older terms *phallocentrism* (focusing on the masculine point of view) and *logocentrism* (focusing on language in assigning meaning to the world.)

print, new models of women, as encouraged by Cixous' urgent plea: 'Woman must write herself'.[16] As Maria Morelli contends, 'feminism emerges unequivocally in her [Ferrante's] texts as an intricate nexus between violence, power, and gender roles, which appears in line with "second-wave" feminist theorisations regarding the social construction of patriarchal supremacy in the sexual as well in the reproductive sphere'.[17] At the same time, Ferrante's narratives cannot be easily contained within feminist theory: her stories often describe ways of being that are much wilder and less governable than can be provided for by academic debate. As James Wood declares, 'there is something post-ideological about the savagery with which Ferrante attacks the themes of motherhood and womanhood'.[18] Ferrante does not so much seethe intellectually about the impositions on her characters' lives, as explode alongside them viscerally, with rage and violence. The journalist Judith Thurman concurs: 'She co-opts the pugnacity of a male voice to express the unsayable about female dilemmas and this belligerence feels revolutionary'.[19]

Despite their rebellious tone and to some extent, uncategorisable nature, the *Cronache* novels explore in germination a number of the wider themes and operative tropes that will come to dominate Ferrante's narrative poetics. Present in all her work is the spectacle of the female subject suffused with disgust as it struggles to assert its autonomy under post-war Italian Catholic patriarchal strictures. Daughters and wives grapple with their matrilineal heritage and the traumatic effects of male violence on women, particularly acute in the Neapolitan enclave in which most of Ferrante's work is set. Her depictions of

[16] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 875.
[17] Maria Morelli, 'Margins, Subjectivity, and Violence in Elena Ferrante's Cronache Del Mal d'amore', *Italian Studies*, 76.3 (2021), pp. 329-341 (p. 338).
[18] Wood, 'Women on the Verge', *The New Yorker*.
[19] Thurman, Judith, 'What Brings Elena Ferrante's Worlds to Life?', *The New Yorker*, 2020 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/31/what-brings-elena-ferrantes-worlds-to-life> [accessed 4 May 2024]

maternity continually skewer the idea of the self-abnegating, sexless mother. In a world which seeks to hide the mother's body, Ferrante makes its sensuousness and carnality central and visible.[20] She focuses on women who, as Tiziana de Rogatis puts it 'explode the myth of motherhood, flaunting its abject side with deeply disturbing images, displaying its opposing undercurrents of disgust and primary envy'. Despite the seething repulsiveness and violence of her characters' experiences, however, Ferrante does ultimately provide a vision of optimism for them. She writes: 'Old ghosts arrive, the same ones with whom the women of the past had to reckon. The difference is that these women don't submit to them passively. Instead, they fight and they cope. They don't win, but they simply come to an agreement with their own expectations and find new equilibriums' (Fr, 203). De Rogatis argues that by presenting her characters' lives as nuanced and flawed, Ferrante permits them to inhabit the world more 'authentically' to exist 'as problematic subjects rather than as objects of a fictitious patriarchal idyll'.[21]

One of the primary inspirations for this thesis is an essay by the scholar Stiliana Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante's *La figlia oscura'* (2013), which focuses principally on Ferrante's novel, *The Lost Daughter,* and remains the sole paper on the author's work dedicated entirely to the topic of disgust.[22] Although there are a number of scientific and sociological studies on disgust, the affect is less commonly used as a lens with which to examine literary texts. In her essay Milkova convincingly argues that Ferrante uses disgust as an operative trope to allow her characters space for more slippery transgressive positions in which to negotiate new modes of being. Disgust is also a topic of

[20] Ferrante quotes from Elsa Morante's book of stories *The Andalucian Shawl* ('Lo Scialle Andaluso', 1953) in *Frantumaglia* 'No one, starting with the mother's dressmaker, must think that a mother has a woman's body' (Fr, 18).
[21] de Rogatis, *Key Words,* p. 98.
[22] Stiliana Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante's La Figlia Oscura', *Italian Culture*, 31.2 (2013), pp. 91–109.

discussion in Milkova's book, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* (2021)*,* particularly the section 'Desire and Disgust for the Mother', where she writes: 'the shared experience of menstruation also establishes a physical bond between Delia and Amalia that anchors the narrative in the maternal body'.[23] I expand this idea throughout my thesis, particularly in my chapter 2, which explores how fluids, as well as providing a bond between mothers and daughters, also operate as a subterranean language between the women.

Building on Milkova's framework, I extend my analysis to Ferrante's first two novels, advancing the proposition that disgust becomes less aversive and leans towards becoming a more positive affect through the lens of Ferrante's world view; it is, in fact, an imperative part of the reconstitution of her characters' lives and subjectivities. I attempt to show how Ferrante uses disgust broadly as an affective tool in order to examine and dismantle different models and myths of femininity: women as daughters, as wives, as mothers, all socially assigned female roles that the author continually challenges and debates in her work. Milkova proposes that, 'Disgust in Ferrante's works becomes an instrument for feminine introspection, and for resistance to normative paradigms of motherhood and daughterhood'.[24] My research builds on and develops from Milkova's work, in that I use the topic of disgust to focus closely on all three of the *Cronache* novels, not just *The Lost Daughter,* showing how the affect illuminates the roles and crises of daughters, wives, and mothers across the trilogy. In my first chapter on *Troubling Love*, I explore Ferrante's portrayal of Delia's daughterly disgust and maternal disobedience, and in my second, on *The Days of Abandonment,* I explore Olga's furious disgust at her husband, which results in outbreaks of violence. In the final chapter, on *The Lost Daughter*, I show how Ferrante

[23] Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 64.
[24] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 92.

wrestles with the ultimate taboo of maternal desertion, fiercely claiming Leda's individualism at the expense of her daughters need for her care. I emphasise how Ferrante uses disgust as a clarifying tool and repurposes its negativity, so that her protagonists are not calcified in abject states but are able to use the insights disgust affords them more productively.

In each of my chapters, I relate my readings of Ferrante to the focus of disgust in own creative work. The section 'Bad Sex' in chapter 1, I examines disgust's effect on El's traumatised body as well as the way it has disrupted and de-eroticised sex for her (c.I, 3, pp. 213-214). In chapter 2, the section titled 'Common ground: Anger in *Black Figs* and expelling legacies', I explore El's violent acts as a response to her overwhelming feelings of sexual revulsion (c.II, 5, pp. 246-250). In chapter 3, there is a brief reference to the use of insects, death and the uncanny in my novel. ('Rotting fruit and dead insects' c.III, 1, pp. 260-261). Finally, there is a more sustained focus on my novel in the final part of the thesis, 'Conclusion and more thoughts on *Black Figs'* (c.IV, pp. 278-282) where I examine how El has internalised a patriarchal surveying eye, leaving her in a state of suspended disgust at the world. I also draw together some ideas about Ferrante's notion of 'surveillance' which the author extricates from its typically negative associations with the male gaze into something more productive.

The women Ferrante depicts, although isolated and in crisis, are also on their way to becoming individuals, inching towards new freedoms in their lives through various instances of the 'negative epiphany'.[25] Initially, disgust may well expel them outside social and gender norms into breakdown and a landscape of disorder, but this expulsion ultimately allows

[25] de Rogatis, *Key Words*, p.106

them to cross what the sociologist Norbert Elias calls the 'threshold of repugnance', into a more creative, resisting position in which to assert themselves.[26]

This murky, repulsive affect is necessary for her characters to endure, move through and eventually emerge from. I expand and develop the idea of a secret, fluid-based corporeal bond between Ferrante's characters, not just shared, but somehow transferring signals and nurturance between bodies, provoking liquid responses and counter-responses – a hidden, transgressive, but ultimately reparative means of communication.

[26] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, ed. by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell, trans. by Edmund Jepcott, rev. edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 51.

I.DAUGHTERLY DISGUST IN FERRANTE'S *TROUBLING LOVE*

'A secret cord that can't be cut binds us to the bodies of our mothers: there is no way to detach ourselves, or at least I've never managed to. It's impossible to go back inside her; it's hard to move past her shadow.'[27]

In this chapter I will offer a close reading of Ferrante's first novel, *Troubling Love*, exploring key sections that pertain to disgust, desire and maternal disobedience. I will focus on particular passages that contain motifs of disgust such as bodily fluids and ugly sex, as well as the maternal body, which is portrayed as uncomfortably sensualised, abject and disruptive. This is a focus for my novel *Black Figs* too, where El's dysmorphic disgust at her own post-natal body threads throughout the narrative and where sexual encounters become incongruous and alienating as she tries to negotiate desire through a prism of self-loathing; I expand on this later in this chapter (pp. 213-214).

My exploration focuses on the tensions between Delia and her mother Amalia, which Ferrante describes as **'**the troubling love for the maternal image, the only love-conflict that in every case lasts forever' (Fr, 140). As we shall see, the relationship between the women is filled with unresolved tension and buried trauma throughout the novel but reaches a measure of rough reparative acceptance by the end. In some senses, the book relates to Melanie Klein's theory on reparation in her chapter 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' (1937), where a child learns to accept its mother (and father), despite feeling destructive impulses and hatred alongside love and desire. Klein writes, 'The struggle between love and hate, with

[27] Ferrante, Elena, 'Elena Ferrante: "One Morning I Looked at Myself in the Mirror and Recognised My Mother"', trans. by Ann Goldstein, *The Guardian*, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/aug/25/elena-ferrante-one-morning-i-looked-at-myself-in-the-mirror-and-recognised-my-mother> [accessed 17 September 2021]

all the conflicts to which it gives rise, sets in […] in early infancy, and is active all through life'.[28]

But Ferrante particularly uses the emotion of disgust as a way to examine, subvert and problematise male-centred views of femininity and female mother/daughter relationships. In the novel, disgust is shown initially as both a reaction to and symptom of male violence and misogyny; Delia, wound up and stressed, is highly sensitised to male aggression in the present and the past. But disgust is also used as a framework and device to denote something ultimately more constructive, offering Delia a keen and scrutinising gaze, which gradually evolves into a mode of power. The hyper vigilance and 'expressive surveillance' Delia displays, like that of the other protagonists of the *Cronache*, is also defensive – lending her a combative, yet productive edginess.[29] The writer Sianne Ngai points to disgust's more nuanced features in her book *Ugly Feelings* (2004), where, although dubbing it 'the ugliest of ugly feelings'[30] she also sheds light on the emotion's unexpected quality of strength*:* 'In its intense and unambivalent negativity, disgust thus seems to present an outer limit or threshold of what I have called ugly feelings, *preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions*'.[31] Delia's disgust is represented at first as a reaction to suffocating maternal dominance, but gradually also as a symptomatic and defensive response to male violence and a means to inhibit desire after sexual trauma. Eventually, Delia's ambivalent disgust for her mother - the relationship's intrinsic 'attraction-repulsion' (Fr, 55) – is re-focused away from Amalia to an understanding of the historic

[28] Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other Works, 1921-1945* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1975), p.309.
[29] de Rogatis, *Key Words,* p. 107.
[30] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* (Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 335.
[31] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 354. (my emphasis)

violence they have both endured. Thus, disgust comes to hold a peculiarly positive currency for Delia, a far more constructive valence than is at first perceived.

1.The maternal body

Troubling Love is narrated by Delia, a Rome-based graphic artist in her 40s, single and childless, who returns to Naples on a two-day trip for her mother's funeral. Amalia has reportedly drowned off the coast near Minturno, but Delia is suspicious. Once in the city, she is subjected to a number of disturbing encounters featuring her mother's racketeer lover Caserta, her abusive painter father (divorced from Amalia, but still controlling), her shady uncle Filippo, and Caserta's son, Polledro. Delia moves through the city and her mother's apartment, trying on and discarding her mother's clothes, pursuing and being pursued by Caserta and following clues in an attempt to discover how Amalia really died. We never find out, but we know that Amalia was controlled to the end by men — her lover, her ex-husband — who used a range of misogynistic controls. She was also spied on by her neighbour, the widow de Riso, and even by her own daughter; Delia's mimicry of the controlling male gaze upon her mother reinforces, as Ferrante writes, 'the murky male game aimed at the use, the control, the violent protection of a woman's body that was too seductive' (Fr, 54).

Ferrante co-opts noirish elements into the novel: was Delia's mother murdered or did she commit suicide? The last interaction Delia and her mother have whilst Amalia is alive suggests foul play: 'My mother spoke incoherently about a man who was following her [...] I begged her to tell me where she was. She changed her tone, said that it was better not to. "Lock yourself in, don't open to anyone," she advised me. The man wanted to harm me too

[…] there was nothing more' (TL, 14). Interestingly, this mystery is never resolved but as the novel's beginning shows, both mother and daughter begin the narrative traumatised and severed from one another, one drowned, the other in a state of blocked agency, displaying, as Lisa Mullenneaux, in her essay, 'Burying Mother's Ghost,' observes, that: 'mother-daughter estrangement as the inevitable price of male violence'.[32]

Ferrante's short novel is in part an examination and exhumation of repressed child sexual abuse and the divisive effect of male violence on women's relationships. But it is primarily the story of a conflict between daughter and mother, a story still not given enough exposure. As Adrienne Rich writes, 'The cathexis between mother and daughter, essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story'.[33] *Troubling Love* also finds itself within a relatively small group of books that have explored daughterly animosity, disgust and matricidal fantasy.[34] Other notable instances include Irene Nemirovsky's *Le Bal* (1930), Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (1983), Alice Sebold's *The Almost Moon* (2007) and more recently, Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2019).[35] But although the concepts of matrophobia, which Rich refers to as 'the fear, not of one's mother or motherhood, but of *becoming* one's mother' [36] and the monstrous mother are common motifs in popular horror or thriller fiction and films, they remain unusual in literary fiction.[37]

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[32] Lisa Mullenneaux, 'Burying Mother's Ghost: Elena Ferrante's Troubling Love' *Forum Italicum*, 41.1 (2007), pp. 246–250, (p. 246).
[33] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Norton paperback edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 225.
[34] In Adriana Cavarero's words, 'horror has the face of a woman.' See Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 14.
[35] Austria's Elfriede Jelinek's disturbing novels explore female sexuality, power, aggression and sexual abuse. In Alice Sebold's novel, *The Almost Moon*, artist's model Helen fulfils a life-long desire to kill her mother by suffocation.
[36] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 235.
[37] Films featuring monstrous mothers include *Psycho* (1960), *Carrie* (1976) *Mommie Dearest* (1981) *Mother's Day (*1980, 2010), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), *The Alien Franchise* (1979-2024), *The Babadook* (2014) *Mom and Dad* (2017) and others. Barbara Creed's classic psychoanalytic book, *The Monstrous Feminine* challenges the patriarchal view of women as victim by arguing that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body. See Barbara Creed, *The*

In a review of Alice Sebold's novel, originally published in *La Repubblica* (2008), Ferrante writes that stories of matricide are much less firmly rooted in the cultural imagination than those of patricide, 'and so are less predictable', and she asks herself whether cultural inhibitions are 'too powerful for a staging of the crime of crimes?' [38] Traversing this taboo area, especially in Western Europe where the cult of maternal self-sacrifice persists, is something Ferrante clearly wanted to explore through Amalia, whose fleshy, laughing ghost haunts *Troubling Love*. Ferrante makes the more unsettling aspects of the mother-daughter nexus the dominant focus of this book; Amalia's body, even in death, is attractively alluring, but also threatens to submerge Delia. To quote Rich again, 'where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely'.[39]

Disgust enters *Troubling Love* immediately as a mode of expression for daughter Delia, both psychologically and ontologically. She is suffused with disgust at herself, more so at her mother Amalia, as well as at the abusive men (father, uncle, lover) around them, at the restrictive and suffocating city spaces, even at the dialect of Naples itself. The emotion of disgust, which Winfried Menninghaus describes as 'one of the most violent affections of the human perceptual system […] a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-presentation in the face of unassimilable otherness' keeps Delia in a state of emotional paralysis and celibacy, strongly resisting her mother's legacy, yet unable to move on.[40] Disgust acts as an internal censor, keeping compassion and tenderness in abeyance. As

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Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Popular Fictions Series (London; New York: Routledge, 1993; repr.2007).

[38] Ferrante, Elena, 'Elena Ferrante on Alice Sebold's New Novel, The Almost Moon', trans. by Ann Goldstein, *Europa Editions*, 2008 <http://www.europaeditions.com/news/340/elena-ferrante-on-alice-sebold-s-new-novel-the-almost-moon> [accessed 22 April 2021].

[39] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* p. 235.

[40] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 1.

William Miller writes in *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), 'Disgust rules mark the boundaries of self; the relaxing of them marks privilege, intimacy, duty, and caring'.[41] Yet, despite presenting herself as dispassionate, unconsciously Delia continues to hanker after the lost maternal attachment.

As the novel progresses, Delia's revulsion towards Amalia also seems to be a way to inhibit the emergence of traumatic memories of abuse which she falsely associates with her. But the emotion is always confused; in fact, Ferrante asserts that Delia's responses to Amalia's display of sensuality, far from being hermetically sealed, often burst through, leaving her, 'choking between repulsion and desire' (Fr, 31). Working alongside Delia's taut frigidity, Amalia presents as erotically robust, 'an olive-skinned hairy woman' washing her hair that gleams 'like the skin of a panther' using brown soap, ashes and lye from a street seller. 'The drops slid down over her nose, toward her mouth, until she caught them with her red tongue, and it seemed to be she was saying: "Good"' (TL,30). Ferrante herself has referred to the 'erotic vapour that the maternal body gives off' (Fr, 220). The motif of the red tongue, Amalia's and her elderly lover Caserta's, emerges at different times as a source of both fascinated horror and sexual arousal for Delia: 'The tongue shot out from the lips and retracted at a velocity that hypnotised me. As an adolescent I would close my eyes on purpose to reproduce that scene and would contemplate it with a mixture of attraction and repulsion' (TL, 35).

Delia's longing to sever the physical and psychical bond with Amalia is iterated throughout the first part of the novel. On the very first page, disgusted by her mother's 'odour', she recoils from the possibility that their bodies will even touch. 'When she came in

[41] William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, rev. edn (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 11.

with her coffee, I huddled to one side so that she wouldn't touch me as she sat down on the edge of the bed' (TL, 11). Again, in chapter 12 she states, that for years:

> […]out of hatred, out of fear, I had wanted to eliminate every root I had in her, even the deepest: her gestures, the inflections of her voice, her way of taking a glass or drinking from a cup, her method of putting on a skirt, as if it were a dress…how she did her most intimate washing…the rhythms of her breath. All of it remade, so that I could detach myself from her (TL, 64).

Delia tries to differentiate herself from Amalia by shortening her hair and adopting a masculine edginess. But despite attempts to erase the maternal legacy from her body, she continues to be haunted and messily re-attached; she cannot, no matter how hard she tries, expel her mother. In the terms of Julia Kristeva's model of abjection, Amalia seems irrevocably part of Delia's 'personal archaeology'– 'the jettisoned object' which 'lies there, quite close, but […] cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries and fascinates desire […] And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master'.[42]

Paradoxically countering Delia's desire for violent separation, Ferrante populates her novel with numerous scenes and images depicting unnerving transgressions between mother and daughter. These episodes (mostly memories, but sometimes appearing to be hallucinations or visions occurring in the narrative present), build a cumulative sense of taboo-breaking intimacy. When her own period floods at Amalia's funeral in chapter 2, Delia recalls an image of her mother unsticking a menstrual cloth from her vulva. In chapter 3, a flashback has Amalia exposing her 'flabby white stomach' (TL, 24) to her daughter, giggling manically and daring her to touch it. In chapter 4, in an episode that blurs the line between

[42] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. by Leon S.Roudiez, reprint edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 1-2.

hallucination and flashback, Delia waxes Amalia's inner thighs and groin, bursting vein capillaries, making her bleed, and bruising her skin, 'as if I wanted to subject her to a painful trial and she let me, without saying a word, as if she had agreed to the trial' (TL, 29). In chapter 12, Delia confesses a strange desire to suck her mother's fingernail, admitting, 'My mother's wounded finger […] was purple, and the nail appeared to sink into the crescent. For a long time I'd wanted to lick it and suck it, more than her nipples' (TL, 63-64). As de Rogatis suggests, 'The mother's physical wounds become objects of adoration and sexual arousal' and the line between pain and pleasure with hints of erotic domination underlines the mother-daughter nexus.[43] In chapter 16, in what may be a hallucination or a memory, Amalia watches Delia examine her 'vagina with a mirror' (TL, 81). The subversive acts continue with the borrowing and intermingling of underwear: Delia repeatedly sniffs and wears her mother's used bras and knickers, leaving her own blood-stained ones among her mother's in a game of clothes swapping. Menninghaus' comment, 'Everything seems at risk in the experience of disgust', is entirely apposite for the portrayal of their relationship.[44]

In Julia Kristeva's theory, abjection is the feeling of subjective horror when faced with a threatened breakdown in subject-object relations. Its key signifiers, in addition to bodily wastes and fluids, are the maternal body and the corpse: 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject'.[45] In the novel, Ferrante presents us with two representations of the abject at once, a maternal figure who is also the ultimate signifier of abjection: a corpse. According to Kristeva's logic, the child is forced to violently sever its bond with the maternal figure and cast it off as unclean or abject in order to preserve its own subjectivity. However as both Kristeva and Ferrante show, the

[43] de Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 97.
[44] Menninghaus, *Disgust*, p. 1.
[45] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

break is never clean, the abject, 'simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject'[46] so that 'It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling'.[47] For Kristeva, the female child is unable to fully extricate herself from the mother, unlike the male child who expresses horror at his dependence and is able to move on to eroticise other female bodies.

The sections of uneasy filial/maternal proximity which feature in the book are also a way of showing how the women merge identities or bodies, inhabiting each other intersubjectively. On the first page, Amalia seems to force Delia to transmogrify. 'I had the impression that as she bustled about she transformed my body into that of a wizened child' (TL, 11). At Amalia's funeral, overcome with repulsion and fear while being a pall bearer, ('my mother, butchered by the autopsy, had grown heavier and heavier'; TL, 16), Delia is mostly anxious 'that the wooden box might slide into me, between the collarbone and the neck, along with the body it contained' (TL, 17). Despite describing herself as 'strong, lean, quick and decisive; not only that, I liked being confident of being so' (TL, 37), Delia later admits to being an unwilling host body to her mother: 'I had Amalia under my skin, like a hot liquid that had been injected into me at some unknown time' (TL, 86). She continues to be haunted by her deceased mother's laughter, her body, her 'embarrassing physicality' (TL, 33). Over and again, the reader is presented with Delia's fear of being broken into and inhabited by Amalia. But the need for detachment, rather than fulfilling her, leaves Delia feeling numb, restless, unable to let anyone else, whether partner or child, 'root' in her either. Again, revealing the central paradox of the book, in chapter 12, Delia confirms her conflicted position of love and hate in another body-snatching metaphor, her child-self

[46] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p. 5.
[47] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.

returning furtively, undercover, trying to steal metaphorical morsels of the maternal bond/body: 'Little, too little, the booty I had managed to seize, tearing it from her blood, her belly, and the measure of her breath, to hide in my body, in the capricious manner of the brain' (TL, 65). The image of Delia tearing and feeding on Amalia's body to sustain herself, reflects the disturbing wells of unconscious aggression and need, equally present in Delia's response to Amalia. This concurs with Claire Hanson's proposal that the maternal body, 'located at the intersection of biology and culture', has been constructed as both a site of desire and a threat, 'constitutively unstable […] a troubling, disruptive body'.[48] Amalia's troubling maternal body is certainly mutable and disorderly in this way, situated at a juncture between male violence and her daughter's desire, but also wields an uncanny power of its own. The layering of fascination and repulsion towards the mother's body, is encapsulated in a scene in chapter one where Delia identifies Amalia's corpse:

> I saw the body, and, faced with that livid object, felt that I had better grab onto it in order not to end up in some unknown place. It hadn't been assaulted. It showed only some bruises, a result of the waves that, though gentle, had pushed her all night against some rocks at the edge of the water. It seemed to me that round her eyes she had traces of heavy makeup. I observed for a long time, uneasily, her legs, olive-skinned, and extraordinarily youthful for a woman of sixty-three. With the same uneasiness I realised that the bra was very different from the shabby ones she usually wore. The cups were made of finely worked lace and revealed the nipples. (TL, 14-15)

Although the language is detached, clinical – 'the' body, 'that livid object', the objectified 'it', – Ferrante shows us that Delia's disgust is mixed with a discomforting appreciation of the body's erotic allure. Despite the bruises, her mother's corpse has youthful, tanned legs and a

[48] Clare Hanson, 'The Maternal Body', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Body in Literature*, ed. by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 87–100, (p. 87).

bra revealing its nipples. The 'uneasy' mix of elements here show Delia's attempts to grapple with her mother's overt sexuality, redolent even in death, the underwear metonymically representing her mother's body as well as, 'the iconography of the female body today, a summary of the woman in search of herself' (Fr, 56).[49] Delia's uneasy fascination corresponds to Sianne Ngai's proposition that 'The disgusting seems to say, "You want me," imposing itself on the subject as something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed'.[50] In her book *Savoring Disgust,* Carolyn Korsmeyer also notes that disgust exerts 'a paradoxical magnetism' upon the viewer.[51] This relates, too, to Freud's 'reaction-formation' where feelings of disgust and shame work together to supress unconscious primal desires such as incest, although the containment is never complete; as humans, we are still compelled to find disturbing sights fascinating, to return to sites that arouse our disgust, or to repeat behaviours we know are repulsive and or destructive.[52] Applying these insights, I want to suggest that Ferrante's transgressive depictions of her characters' lives invite the reader into a more attentive mode of reading the text, to bracingly receive her characters' points of view. In presenting images that provoke repulsion in the reader, she draws the reader in close, perhaps disgusted, yet also allured, to problematic, ugly and heterogenous elements of her female characters and their relationships. Thus, her descriptions and the process of

[49] Clothes are significant in Ferrante's world as they can denote sexual freedom and creativity as well as the female body portioned up and controlled. (Amalia had been wearing ugly clothes for decades so as not to challenge the approbation of her jealous husband; now seemingly free from him with a lover, she delights in sexy underwear.) In *Troubling Love*, Delia's wearing of her mother's clothes eventually part of the process of repairing the split between them.
[50] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 335.
[51] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p.3.
[52] Freud's '*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*' (1905) refers to his idea of 'reaction formation', disgust conjoining with shame and morality to work as a dam repressing unconscious sexual and animalistic desire: 'Disgust seems to be one of the forces which have led to a restriction of the sexual aim.' See Sigmund Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis,* new edn (London: Vintage Classics, 2005), p.296.

reading them, offers both writer (cathartically), and reader (exhilaratingly), a disruptive female view, that exists outside the romanticised or scopophilic male gaze.[53]

2. Fluidity

In Ferrante's narrative poetics in *Troubling Love*, the theme of liquids, those that are abject and gross, those that breach their borders, and the feminine fluids that bond women more positively, move in a continuum, shifting back and forth between topography, bodies and dialect. The insistent thread, not only of liquids but also, relatedly, of putrefaction, pulses through the novel. The Gulf of Naples is fizzy like a drink, vegetables rot in the streets, funeral flowers putrefy in the heat, a body drowns, storms drench Delia's clothes, menstrual blood, as well as sweat and sperm, flood through the narrative. Ferrante refers to Naples as a 'woman-city', a place of 'decomposition, of dislocation, of panic' that fuses with the bodies of her protagonists: 'that city is not an ordinary place, it's an extension of the body, a matrix of perception, the term of comparison of every experience' (Fr, 65-67). Delia's inner dissolution, or *smarginatura*, is connected to the city: following the sudden flood of her period, the urban setting threatens to erupt too. 'The streets of topographic memory seemed to me unstable, like a carbonated drink that, if shaken, bubbles up and overflows. I felt the city come apart in the heat' (TL, 17). Unsavoury fluids are also embodied in the flow of Neapolitan obscenity which for Delia represents sexual violence. In a charged section in

[53] In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey uses a psychoanalytic framework to reference two kinds of (male) gaze used when watching film or art narratives, voyeuristic or fetishistic, the latter relating to scopophilia, (the 'pleasure of looking') which positions the female subject as the castrated passive object of desire. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

chapter 2, Delia asks a man, whom she later realises must be Caserta (Amalia's ageing Camorrist boyfriend), for directions on the street. In one of the book's surreal episodes, he quickly changes form, from neatly attired gentleman to a kind of sticky arachnid spouting obscenities. 'He followed me with his voice, which changed from courteous to a threatening hiss of words that became more and more vulgar. I was hit by a stream of obscenities in dialect, a soft river of sound that involved me, my sisters, my mother in a concoction of semen, saliva, faeces, urine, in every possible orifice'(TL, 19). The dialect of Naples is seen as a 'frullato', a repulsive milkshake or smoothie of the disgusting in condensed form, a pornographic representation of Milkova's 'aesthetics' of disgust'.[54] Naple's dialectical flow and Kristeva's abject waste fluids combine, and the city itself becomes a propulsive metaphorical wave of male sexual violence. Disgusting as this milkshake metaphor is, it does not fall upon an inert subject; neither Amalia nor her daughter Delia, who defends herself by adopting a stance of 'cold masculinity' and defiance, is passive or unresisting (Fr, 56).

The women in *Troubling Love* are female subjects in a battleground, their bodies, in the way described by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), are sites 'of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles'.[55] Between mother and daughter, female body fluids overflow in an uncontrolled way and are also attributed to the dead maternal figure. Ferrante's characters often show a hyper-awareness of death, the corpse, the 'body becoming a thing, a leather sack leaking air and liquids' (Fr, 100). Hanson writes that the maternal body's 'most striking characteristic is its mutability, as it expands,

[54] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 94.
[55] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 19.

dilates, contracts and expels. It is also leaky and permeable, losing mucous, blood and milk'.[56]

One of the principal ways in which Amalia haunts her daughter is through a network of metaphors and images relating to fluids and viscosity. Despite Delia's longing to psychically expel her mother, the maternal-filial bond persists, beckoning and trickling in through liminal spaces, manifesting in images of seepage and bodily waste. These fluids create a sub-narrative of liquid communication between the two women's bodies, which serves to remind Delia of her origins and gradually re-bonds the women.

In chapter 2, while helping to carry her mother's corpse, Delia imagines Amalia's body inside its coffin, 'butchered by the autopsy,' and feels a 'guilty relief' that it will soon be gone, but in the very instant that she has this thought, her period begins (TL, 16). This involuntary flooding at the very moment she hopes to finally exorcise her mother is interpreted as a code sent by Amalia. Delia confesses, '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' (TL, 17). This points again to Amalia's alien 'liquid' ghost working inside Delia. The blood threatens to run down Delia's legs as the funeral progresses, so she escapes, finding a 'tiny stinking room with a dirty toilet and a yellow stained sink', and is assailed by a further communication from Amalia in in the dim light of the room: 'In the shadows I saw my mother, her legs spread, as she unhooked a safety pin and, as if they were pasted on, removed some bloody linen rags from her sex; without surprise, she turned and said to me calmly, "go on, what are you doing here?" I burst into tears for the first time for many years' (TL, 19).

[56] Hanson, 'The Maternal Body', p. 87.

Elizabeth Grosz contends that a 'hierarchy of propriety' governs different fluids, writing that in a ranking system of pollutants, menstrual blood (along with faeces, pus and vomit) is seen as one of the worst contaminants, as observed in the work both of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva. The fact that it is *maternal* menstrual blood, feeds into Delia's subjective topology of horror as she shuns anything relating to the carnality of her mother's body with its direct threat to her own subjectivity. As Kristeva argues, 'the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*'. [57] By contrast, tears in Grosz's hierarchy have acquired a 'social representation as a clean fluid, as waterlike […] a different psychological and sociological status than the polluting fluids that dirty the body'.[58] Viewed in this light, Ferrante's prose, typically blunt, presents a deeply unsettling image, whether hallucination, or the flash of a childhood memory: Amalia's body, spread-eagled in the tawdry toilet, whose seepage of blood invokes a flood of weeping from her daughter. Here, one liquid precipitates the flow of another, in a kind of bodily conversion, from blood to tears. In the first half of *Troubling Love*, Delia is shown to have internalised an image of her mother's body and desire as something abject, mimicking the misogyny of her abusive father, uncle and the generations of the Casertas. The mother/daughter relationship lies abandoned in the dark, severed by male abuse. However, by insistently locating the relationship in female bodily processes and fluids, Ferrante not only 'explode(s) the myth of motherhood'[59] (flaunting its abject side), but at the same time repairs and stabilises the bond, connecting mother and daughter through blood cycles. Menstrual blood, tears and sweat, behave implicitly as conduits of connection, returning and restoring them to one another. Initially Amalia's menstrual blood might give Delia a flash of disgusted horror, but it

[57] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.
[58] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,* p. 195.
[59] de Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 95.

also provokes childish tears, and within the narrative they move one ontological step closer towards one another.

In her 1980 lecture, 'Body Against Body: in Relation to the Mother', Luce Irigaray calls for a renewed, nurturing, somatic bond between mothers and daughters: 'We need to discover a language that is not a substitute for the experience of *corps-á-corps* as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body'.[60] Irigaray refers to the 'original matrix' of the mother's body, which has been cast aside within the stronghold of patriarchy, severing the bond between mother and daughter. Lamenting cultural revulsion against the mother, often represented as a 'devouring monster', she writes: 'the opening of the mother, the opening to the mother, appear as threats of contagion, contamination, falling into sickness, madness, death'. She calls for a reinstatement and acceptance of the maternal body with its 'power of giving birth', the womb ('that first home'), and the child's intimate relationship with her mother's flesh 'as the primal place in which we become body'.[61]

The female body, its drives, functions, pains and desires, forms a major part of Ferrante's work. It could be argued that the writer's sustained focus on the female body simply reduces women to an essentialist biological condition. As a counter to this potential critique, we may set Maria Morelli's conclusion that,

> While women's excessive and unsolidified bodies – whose porous contours are constantly permeated by an abundance of fluids such as menstrual blood, vomit, sweat and oozing wounds – come dangerously close to an essentialist definition in which *woman* is reduced to *body*, in Ferrante's novels the latter appears less as a romanticised stronghold of an original female essence than as a locus of resistance to more or less subtle forms of patriarchal coercion.[62]

[60] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies,* trans. by Gillian c. Gill (Columbia University Press, 1993), p.19.
[61] Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, pp. 15–16.
[62] Morelli, 'Margins, Subjectivity and Violence', p. 341.

Ferrante's representation of female bodies that are powerfully resistant, rather than passively sensualised, is nowhere more prevalent than in her depiction of Amalia, a body that seems to be perpetually moving and seeping beyond its designated parameters. This is shown in a key scene in chapter 10, in another of Delia's anxious childhood flashbacks, where she tries to protect her mother from male attention on a tram:

> It was a wasted effort, Amalia's body couldn't be contained. Her hips spread across the aisle towards the hips of the men on either side of her; her legs, her stomach swelled toward the knee or shoulder of whoever was sitting in front of her. Or maybe it was the opposite. Maybe it was from the men who pasted themselves to her, like flies to the sticky yellowish paper that hung in butcher shops or, loaded with dead insects, dangled over the counters of the salumieri. It was hard to keep the men away with knees or elbows. They caressed my head lightly and said to my mother: "This pretty little girl's getting crushed" (TL, 53).

Here, Amalia is huge, out of proportion, giantess-like. Her body swells and grows, losing its contours, spreading along the carriage of the tram, relating once again to Ferrante's key concept of *smarginatura* or bleeding margins. In this scene, Ferrante toys not only with excessive corporeality, but also the margins that disgust is designed to police and control. As William Miller writes: 'Disgust helps mark boundaries of culture and boundaries of the self'.[63] These boundary lines, which Mary Douglas calls 'dangerous', also challenge our notions of order and epistemological reality: 'If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins'.[64] As well as keeping repulsion and abjection at bay, separated, margins are also where waste substances lurk and threaten to burst through, where there is fast-moving seepage and flow,

[63] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust,* p. 50.
[64] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* 1st edn (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2002), p. 150.

neither liquid nor solid, often provoking feelings of chaos and horror. In exaggerating Amalia's body contours, Ferrante rejects the neat space allocated for women's bodies. Amalia's body swells like a dough, is disorderly, spilling over its designated borders, seeming to align with Grosz's argument that in the West the female body has been constructed 'not only as a lack or absence, but with more complexity […] as formless flow […] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order'.[65] Amalia's body is powerful, its disruptive qualities, its desire to shape-shift and dissolve, to re-form and re-set its own borders, lends it an autonomy and creativity. It is Delia who appears to be suffering the most from her mother's carnality, using herself as barrier in a 'mania to protect my mother from contact with any men' (TL, 53). The final line – 'This pretty little girl is getting crushed' – points to the men's pretence at respectability while groping Amalia. Delia's shame regarding her mother's flesh, her collusion in viewing Amalia as men do, links to the devastating lie she later tells, that she has seen her mother cavorting with Caserta, covering up her own sexual abuse by Polledro's grandfather ('I said to him that Caserta had done and said to Amalia, with her consent, in the basement of the pastry shop, all the things that in reality Antonio's grandfather had said and perhaps done to me'; TL, 153).

Halfway through the passage, however, there is an important foreshadow of change in Delia's perception, simply described in the line, 'Or maybe it was the opposite'. She now sees that it is the predatory men pressing in on her mother who are culpable, as the fly simile starkly shows. The verb 'pasted' reveals male desire as repellent, sticky with associations of waste and decay (TL, 25). This is the first time that we perceive Delia released from an androcentric conceptualisation of Amalia and, in so being, taking a step towards her

[65] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 203.

mother and towards the beginnings of her own clarity about female oppression. In her book *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, Adalgisa Giorgio argues that since the 1980s feminist Italian writers have tried to reinstate the 'lost union' between daughters and mothers with a focus 'on the daughter's quest for identity in relation to the mother', in an attempt to find alternative plots to the Oedipal one: 'Since recognition is a two-way process, the daughter's longing for maternal recognition must be accompanied by her ability to recognise the mother as an individual'.[66] This shift in feminist thinking relates to the story of Delia and Amalia, in that eventually the daughter has to accept that her mother – and indeed she herself – are subjects emerging in a process of individuation. The tram scene allows Delia a feeling of empathy for her mother, harassed by men, by the oppressive gaze of the city. The novel allows Delia no linear path to affinity with her mother, but it is a start, enough for her to begin questioning the historic abuse contaminating them, as she admits in chapter 3: 'I had always known it. There was a line that I couldn't cross when I thought of Amalia. Perhaps I was there in order to cross it. That frightened me' (TL, 25).

3. Bad sex

It is worth noting that Ferrante's operative trope of disgust in the mother/daughter nexus also extends to sections of alienating sex in the *Cronache*, especially the first two novels. Ferrante's descriptions of sex are non-redemptive, with her characters highly attuned to repellent sights and moments of humiliation. For a large portion of *Troubling Love*, Delia co-opts her father's revulsion at Amalia's exuberant fleshy glee. But Delia is also broadly

[66] Adalgisa Giorgio, ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), p. 120.

disgusted by carnality itself, the horror of 'males and females as living organisms' (TL, 63). In chapter 12, she wistfully fantasises humanity as a mass of sexless automatons, with closed and orifice-free bodies. 'I imagined the work of a burin polishing us like ivory, reducing us until we were without holes and without excrescences, all identical and without identity, with no play of somatic features, no weighting of small differences' (TL,63).

Delia is not spared by Ferrante and endures an alienating sexual encounter that spans a long section of chapter 18. After a chase involving Caserta, Delia unexpectantly encounters his son Polledro, a childhood friend, who runs a clothing shop frequented by Amalia. He finds Delia drenched to the skin after a storm and flags down a taxi, offering to take her for lunch at a hotel. She is wearing one of her mother's tight red dresses; as already noted, red is an insistently carnal motif in the novel: Caserta's pointed red tongue flickers in and out ('the frenulum that anchored it kept it from darting toward Amalia'; TL, 75), Amalia also has a long, pointed tongue and Polledro shares the same 'red plastic mouth, stiff with tension' as his father (TL, 71). Yet, despite the sexually suggestive imagery, Ferrante subverts any possibility of voyeurism by layering these images alongside details that repulse or alarm. The sex reflects Delia's personal archive of revulsion and horror, her deep fear of the carnal. She is already repelled by Polledro's puffy body in the taxi, 'bursting with food, with drink, with worries, with resentment' (TL,79).

Both Polledro and the hotel staff express disgust at Delia's bedraggled appearance: 'My face was as if disfigured by an ugly skin disease, dark with mascara around the eyes and flaking or in patches' (TL, 82). But as she bathes in the hotel room alone, she realises with 'unexpected tenderness' that Amalia is under her skin like a liquid and Delia sees her mother's face in her own, in the mirror (TL, 86). 'I put on the satin robe, and for the first time in my life […] had the impression of being beautiful' (TL, 87). This tender moment, however,

another of the novel's signposts towards the women's reparation, is short lived. Polledro reappears and over the next six pages the pair try to have sex, not helped by his physicality ('large heavy breasts') and Delia's sweating nervousness, 'I began to feel my heart pounding. I could hardly bear his dialect or the hostility he gave off' (TL, 88). Polledro doesn't want to kiss, Delia observes, but only 'to explore the entrance to my vagina with his dirty fingers' (TL, 89). She appears to shrink in size ('beside him I felt miniaturised'; TL,79). The scene plays out as an exercise in masochism, with excruciating details and memories, including of the sweetshop cellar where they played as children, and where Delia was abused. Throughout, there are unsettling images, hallucinations and flashbacks, of an insect-like Amalia and Caserta crawling, laughing across the cellar floor, her mother being violently beaten by her father, all tonally permeated with the unconscious shadow of the abuse of Delia by Polledro's grandfather.

Such a provocative approach to sex scenes, eliminating any romantic filter on sex, shocks readers into a more attentive way of reading Ferrante's texts, rather than distracting or arousing them. Laced with unease, such scenes examine and complicate her female characters' drives and motivations and avoid, in her own words, the risk of a scene becoming 'an erotic gift to the spectator' (Fr, 31). In Alessia Ricciardi's chapter 'Cruel Sex' in *Finding Ferrante* (2021), she argues that Ferrante's 'stories are rooted in the terrain of bad sex […] As a result, there is little room in her imaginative universe for sentimental or idealised views of sexuality'.[67] Ricciardi pairs Ferrante with another sexually bold writer, Elfriede Jelinek who, 'often makes fearless use of vulgar or obscene language to repudiate the cliches with which the normative misogyny of European culture stifles women's voices'.[68] It is clear Ferrante

[67] Alessia Ricciardi, *Finding Ferrante: Authorship and the Politics of World Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 27–28.
[68] Ricciardi, *Finding Ferrante*, p. 28.

aims to put a circuit break on any possibility of the reader being aroused, at the same time as demystifying the reality of sex for traumatised women, challenging the role of the grateful and satisfied female sexual partner and subverting the misogynies present in phallocentric language. It is the very absence of love or intimacy which makes the sense of disgust rise so sharply in this chapter. William Miller suggests, 'One way of describing intimacy (and/or love) is as that state in which various disgust rules are relaxed or suspended […] consensual sex means the mutual transgression of disgust-defended boundaries'.[69] And so, without love, or Miller's 'thrill of permitted transgression', sex between Delia and Polledro becomes an awkward dance of coercion and obligation. As he clumsily gropes her, Delia only feels a 'slight pleasure' and a mutual awareness of 'compliance without participation' (TL, 92).

But the scene shifts gear when the topic of female liquids re-emerges. Despite feeling little pleasure, Delia begins to excessively leak vaginally, 'paralysed by a growing embarrassment, because of the copious liquid spilling out of me' (TL, 91). As I have indicated, signifiers of disgust frequently take the form of abject female fluids in the novel, such as menstrual blood, which are repurposed or subverted by Ferrante. Despite the faintly repellent knowledge that Delia is gushing secretions and body sweat, at the same time we are reminded of Amalia. Just moments before Delia took out her tampon, and while washing the makeup off her face, she sensed Amalia 'under my skin, like a hot liquid that had been injected into me at some unknown time' (TL, 86). There is therefore a link made between mother and daughter through fluids, acting as a symbolic conduit of communication between the women, ensuring another step in the reparative dance between them. Delia's wetness and melting becomes subtly synonymous with her matrilineal heritage, the 'liquid'

[69] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 137.

now moving under her skin. But until she fully accepts this, it seems she remains blocked and unable to feel orgasmic pleasure:

> Even when as a girl I had tried to masturbate this had happened. The pleasure spread warmly, without any crescendo, and immediately my skin began to get wet. However much I caressed myself, the only result was that the liquids of my body overflowed: my mouth, instead of getting dry, filled with a cold saliva; sweat ran down my forehead, my nose, my cheeks; my armpits became puddles; not an inch of my skin remained dry; my sex got so wet that the fingers slipped over it without purchase, and I could no longer tell if I was really touching myself or only imagined that I was (TL 91).

With Delia's lack of response, Polledro loses his erection and soon gives up, recoiling at her wetness: 'He pulled back abruptly with a gesture of repulsion as he felt me soaking wet. "You're not well," he said uncertainly. "I'm fine. But even if I were sick, it would be too late to cure me." […] I saw in the half light that he was drying his fingers, his face, his legs with the sheet' (TL, 93). Ferrante own words summarise Delia's predicament best, **'**Her relationships with men are not experiences, but experiments intended to test a choked-off body: failed experiments' (Fr, 31). As the chapter ends, Delia's memories of the domestic abuse of Amalia surface in her mind as well as the sight of her 'bleeding,' after a beating, mother and daughter locking eyes in shock, silenced by masculine menace. 'I looked at her for a long time, bruised and dirty, and she looked at me for a long time' (TL, 93). The scene in the hotel room ends dismally for both parties ('We had in common only the violence we witnessed'; TL, 93). Delia's final thoughts reveal the effects of the abuse she was subjected to by Polledro's grandfather. Still unable to articulate its violence, she settles for a familiar recourse of masochism and sublimation in the experience with Polledro: 'I was grateful for the small dose of humiliation and pain he had inflicted on me' (TL, 95). This lack of articulacy

is common amongst victims of sexual abuse, as Judith Herman explains in her book, *Trauma and Recovery* (2015), 'Traumatized people relive in their bodies the moments of terror that they cannot describe in words'.[70]

The body remembers its trauma, whether it is the shared physical abuse of mother and daughter in *Troubled Love*, or the medically sanctioned cuts and assaults endured in childbirth by El as in my novel *Black Figs.* Delia's sexual abuse leaves her longing to be orifice-free and polished smooth, El's trauma results in an abject horror of her newly stitched and sore body, still recovering from the ordeal of her second son's birth: 'I was torn above and below like a split tyre' (BF, 47). El seems oddly energised by a self-loathing and sex seems tainted with obligation and nausea. In a flashback, recalling her first time pregnant, she feels revulsion and antipathy at sexual contact with her husband Tom.

> Closing my eyes, I turned around to Tom, reached down, unzipped his fly and hooked him out. Then almost vehemently, I began to move my hand up and down.
> 'Oh God,' he said. I murmured in his ear, approximations of things a whore might say. I warned him not to come on my side of the bed, twisting away with a grimace, as if about to be splashed by a dirty puddle.
> He was trying to be gentlemanly about it. Neat.
> 'What about you?' he gasped as the last webs spurted out. I looked away (BF, 73).

In this scene, intimacy has become something to endure, and the prose lingers on repulsive details. When feelings are numb or blunted, sex appears coercive, ludicrous, animal. El's pleasuring of Tom is mechanical and detached; she feels more amphibious than human. Later, when the couple have sex for the first time after she has given birth and after biting his hand in disgust to ward off his advances, she tells us:

[70] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence: from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 2015 edn (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 239.

> It sears, as if I am being gently hacked into, but I bite my lip and endure most of it, hoping he'll get to a smoother run, past the sore tapestry of bumps and fissures […] He's as gentle as he can be, but each blind shunt into me still feels violating. I resist the impulse to kick him out across the room. It's one of the first times I've ever fucked Tom without a sense of desire, my sex numb (BF, 126-127).

Just as I suggested Ferrante does with her sex descriptions, my aim is to make it as disenchanting as possible, so that there is a transference of El's feelings to readers – rather than any erotisisation. For the duration of the novel, El struggles with a smothering internal campaign of disgust and feelings of abjection that she tries, but fails, to expel. Unlike Ferrante's women, however, she continues to flounder in a non-redemptive struggle, her negative epiphanies darken her world, and at the end of the book appears to remain entombed inside herself. And she has no positive matrilineal figure to help guide her through as Delia does and so struggles to redraw a sense of her identity or find new threads of self-determination.

In *Troubling Love*, Delia also grapples with non-cathartic feelings and a stasis of the flesh, especially in relation to sex. For a time, her 'blocked off' somatic numbness, the result of historic abuse, as well as the hateful desire she directs at her mother's body, seem insurmountable. But by the end of the novel, Delia softens and begins a redemptive path towards Amalia through the conduits of their flesh and the sub-narrative liquid flow. Irigaray writes that as women 'we need to be careful […] not again to kill the mother who was immolated at the birth of our culture. Our task is to give life back to that mother, to the mother who lives within us and among us'.[71] This task of returning and restoring Delia to her mother's legacy and body while at the same time retaining her autonomy, is already in motion towards the end of the book and on the last page of the novel becomes clearer still.

[71] Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 18.

When examining her ID card, she takes a pen, and using her cartoonist skills, begins drawing Amalia's hairstyle over her own profile photograph, realising with pleasure that the two of them look almost identical. 'I sketched a rebel curl over the right eye […] the old-fashioned hair-style […] suited me. Amalia had been. I was Amalia' (TL, 139).

II. DISGUST AND VIOLENCE IN *THE DAYS OF ABANDONMENT*

> 'Whenever a part of you emerges that's not consistent with the canonic female, you feel that part causes uneasiness in you and in others, and you'd better get rid of it in a hurry. Or if you have a combative nature…if you're not someone who calms down, if you refuse to be subjugated, *violence enters*' (Fr, 227).

In this chapter I continue my exploration of disgust, this time focusing on its more violent manifestations in *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), Ferrante's second published novel. In section 5 of this chapter, 'Common ground: Anger in *Black Figs* and expelling legacies', I examine my own protagonist's rage and violence which manifests in thoughts and murderous impulses (pp. 246-250).

In my first chapter I proposed that Ferrante's intimacy with her subjects elicits an unusually intense experience for her readers, described by Sarah Chihaya in *The Ferrante Letters,* as 'a strange kind of affective inhabitation'.[72] This unusually affective response in the reader happens nowhere more forcefully than in her second book, the longest of the *Cronache* trilogy, when we follow the protagonist Olga's fury after she has been left by her husband Mario, for a much younger woman. Set in Turin in the 1990s, the story details the fractured weeks after Mario's exit as Olga tries to care for her children, Ilaria and Gianni, and the family dog, Otto. As she falls apart, so do the relationships around her: friends, repelled by her noisy fury, fail to support her, workmen patronise her, and even her children turn against her at times, comparing her unfavourably to their father's new twenty-year-old lover, Carla. Olga is haunted by another key character, the *poverella*, a woman from her Neapolitan childhood, who committed suicide after being left by her

[72] Chihaya and others, *The Ferrante Letters,* p. 69.

husband. The rejected woman, called Emilia, becomes a key motif of abjection in the book, what Susan Pickard calls the 'pitiful hag' (Fr, 107), or in Ferrante's own words, 'a sort of synthesis of the abandoned woman, from Ariadne on'. But she also serves as a totemic warning of what Olga does not want to become, what she has 'feared most' since she was a child (DA, 116).

In this novel, as in the other two books of the *Cronache*, disgust operates in a number of radical ways: as a lens and, as Milkova proposes, an 'operative trope' for the author to examine her characters' lives; as a mode of expression that allows characters to transgress boundaries, and as a disruptive but clarifying force that finally brokers new possibilities.[73] Disgust, in relation to this last function, offers Ferrante's heroines a twisted passage out of their desperation, but there is, at first, a violent imperative to break down in order to reconstitute themselves.

So far, I have tried to show the ways in which bodily fluids and secretions elicit and express a kind of sensationalised disgust particularly in *Troubling Love*, as well as acting as a bonding agent and conduit between mother and daughter. In this chapter, I will explore how disgust is expressed through verbal, mental and physical violence – towards the self and others, by a deserted wife. For Olga, disgust works as a reactive emotion, a response that incites violence, but also as a lens to turn a critical eye on the past. This traumatic short-cut becomes a means for self-enquiry, a new and clearer lens through which Olga can view the negative influences that have shaped her life. This process of auto-exegesis becomes a way to expel the legacies of her husband's control from her body and psyche. By the end of the novel, as in the others of the trilogy, Ferrante repurposes the ugly affect

[73] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 91.

of disgust into something more productive, offering her characters a peculiar rite-of-passage out of their private hells. For Olga, perhaps initially the most conformist of all Ferrante's characters, her crisis shatters the false carapace of systemic controls on the female body and propels her into wild physical aggression.

1.Abject spaces

'He contains or envelops her with walls while enveloping himself and his things in her flesh.' (Luce Irigaray)[74]

The precondition for Olga's eruption into violence is a tight spatial confinement, both literal and metaphorical. Ferrante's second novel feels more claustrophobic than the other works in the *Cronache*; while Delia in *Troubling Love* and Leda in *The Lost Daughter* roam restlessly around cities and beach resorts, Olga's breakdown happens within the tight confines of a Turin apartment, with occasional dog walks in a small park outside or short car rides on the hunt for her husband Mario with his lover Carla. In Ferrante's fictional world, internal spaces (bathrooms, cellars, storerooms, flats) become what Stiliana Milkova calls 'symbolic enclosures' for her characters, creating what Milkova further describes as 'the maternal time-space regulated by traditional, patriarchal notions of motherhood and femininity'. Inside these prisons, she continues, Ferrante's 'characters, torn apart by *frantumaglia*, regress to the realm of their raging, murderous, or suicidal female ancestors'.[75] These interiors, synonymous with what Tiziana de Rogatis' calls, the 'ancient

[74] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* trans. by Carolyn L. Burke and Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 11.
[75] Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 86.

maternal cave',[76] threaten to lock Olga to a historical 'chain of mute or angry women' (LD, 71).[77] As the novel progresses, the fraught links between Olga's embodied anguish and the space she inhabits become increasingly marked, and, as Maria Morelli proposes, Olga's 'bodily unruliness soon extends metonymically to the house'.[78] Throughout the novel, the technology that enables communication and practical support repeatedly fails: landlines, computers and cell phones break, door locks stop working and trap the family inside. Reflective materials explode as if by telekinesis, wine bottles break into pasta, mirrors give back fractured Picasso-like reflections as if the atomic structure of reality is itself is coming apart.

As a result of her disintegration, brought on by Mario's desertion, Olga is ousted from her previous status in life, both spatially and socially. Her narrow view inside the flat creates a myopic neuroticism, amplifying domestic nausea and further fuelling her breakdown; examples of what Olga is failing to do in the house are frequent, adding to the narrative's escalation of tension: 'The children hadn't eaten anything. I myself still had to have breakfast, wash. The hours were passing. I had to separate the dark clothes from the white. I had no more clean underwear. The vomit-stained sheets. Run the vacuum. Housecleaning' (DA, 118). Her fantasy of heteronormality falls apart once Mario leaves, thrusting her downwards into a state of abjection and setting the stage for unmoderated levels of masochism and violence. One of Winfried Menninghaus's definitions of disgust is a

[76] Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 91.
[77] Sibilla Aleramo's novel '*A Woman'* ('Una Donna,' 1906) is a key influence on Ferrante, with its exploration of a young mother's bid for freedom in a violent marriage and repressive Italian social order. The line Ferrante repurposes a few times in the *Cronache* is at the end of the book when Aleramo writes: 'Why do we idealise self-sacrifice in mothers? Where does this inhuman idea of self-immolation come from? It has been passed down from mother to daughter for centuries. It has produced a monstrous causal chain.' See Sibilla Aleramo, *A Woman,* trans. By Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics, 2020) p.208.
[78] Morelli, 'Margins, Subjectivity and Violen*ce',* p. 36.

'scandalous invasion of heterogeneity', implying chaos and a dissociative loss of control of reality for the subject.[79] Olga's feelings of horror at the new unreal, undifferentiated disorder in her life threaten to submerge her in an 'alluvial flow that eliminated boundaries', a sticky liminality where she can no longer make ordinary decisions nor can perceive differences between thoughts and fantasies, words and actions (DA, 102). She is now unshielded, as Milkova puts it, against the full force of 'women's subalternity in a violent patriarchal world'.[80]

Olga's isolation recalls other tales of domestic entrapment, such as that of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), or the unnamed female narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892).[81] Ferrante also reminds us of the legacy of other abandoned fictional women such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) or de Beauvoir's Monique in *The Woman Destroyed* (1967), which in a metafictional flourish, Olga is reading through the novel. She recalls how, when she was a young aspiring writer, the women in these French novels appeared to her as 'sentimental fools', whereas she was interested in, 'women with resources, women of invincible words' (DA, 21). But as she suffers the same rejection, Olga repeatedly pleads with herself not to succumb to Monique's victimhood: 'Organise your defences, preserve your wholeness, don't let yourself break like an

[79] Menninghaus, *Disgust,* p. 2.
[80] Di Monda, Brianna, and Milkova, Stiliana 'Elena Ferrante and Feminine Creativity', *The Smart Set*, 2022<https://www.thesmartset.com/elena-ferrante-and-feminine-creativity/> [accessed 12 October 2023].
[81] Regarding women's spatial autonomy or lack thereof, Luce Irigaray writes, 'Again and again, taking from the feminine the issue or textures of spatiality. In exchange – but it isn't a real one – he buys her a house, even shuts her up in it, places limits on her that are the opposite of the unlimited site in which he unwillingly situates her. He contains or envelopes her with walls while enveloping himself and his things in her flesh. The nature of these envelopes is not the same: on the one hand, invisibly alive, but with barely visible limits; on the other, visibly limiting or sheltering, but at the risk of being prison-like or murderous if the threshold is not left open'. See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* p.11.

ornament, you're not a knick-knack, no woman is a knick-knack. *La femme rompue, ah, rompue*, the destroyed woman, destroyed, shit' (DA, 57).

After Mario's departure, the flat becomes a strange discordant space which Olga utterly fails to control; on his first return in chapter 8, he rings the doorbell rather than using his keys, which enrages her, as it seems to prove his complete detachment from the family (later he will enter again to steal back some heirloom earrings for Carla). In this key early scene, Ferrante shows us both Olga's desperation as well as Mario's new contempt towards her: he refuses to read her impassioned letters to him, and barely notices her attempts to beautify herself. Olga admits she has always worked hard in her marriage to maintain the project of desirable femininity: washing unpleasant smells from her body, using make up, offering herself up to her husband and being grateful for his attentions, even giving up work and writing to dedicate herself to the domestic realm. Now, feeling the bitter sting of Mario's disgusted rejection, she begins to cultivate a new rage at the world of male carnality and her entrapment in their former shared domestic space.

In a chapter titled, 'The Performativity of Disgust', in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed explores the relationship between disgust and power in spatial terms, asking: 'Why is disgust so crucial to power? Does disgust work to maintain power relations through how it maintains bodily boundaries? The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchising *of spaces* as well as bodies'.[82] In the topographical world of Ferrante's subaltern female subject, disgust operates as a moral and affectual force, maintaining and regulating physical space for women's bodies, in city streets, on buses, inside lifts, tunnels,

[82] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 88. (my emphasis).

and inside apartments.[83] Disgust is an intrinsic part of the interplay between women's bodies and the spaces that they inhabit, whether it is Amalia's objectified flesh on the tram in *Troubling Love* or Olga locked in the confines of her flat in Turin – the shifting margins of their space become analogues of their fraught bodies. In terms of her body in space, Olga's struggle is doubly ontological; first, in her attempt to regain control over her body after it breaks down and, second, to regain autonomy as she moves through social space outside. As her crisis peaks and subsides, spaces and the objects within them, the doors, walls, mirrors, locks and keys, gradually return to their former outlines.

2. Violent language

'As a girl I had liked obscene language, it gave me a sense of masculine freedom' (DA, 22).

Language functions as a labile narrative device in Ferrante's work, reflecting the emotional trajectories of characters' lives as they endure crises and transformations, as well as functioning as a social indicator as they move from one class stratum to another. Olga's disgusted response to Mario's exit is at first expressed in language: obscenities, swearing and vulgar expressions. Like many of the writer's protagonists, Olga originates from a noisy Neapolitan family but has negotiated her way successfully into an intellectual, bourgeois world. She tells us she grew to hate 'raised voices' as a child and responded to her family's

[83] In her essay 'Bodies-Cities' Elizabeth Grosz explores the 'constitutive and mutually defining relations' between bodies and cities, how culture constructs the biological order in its own image, suggesting that the 'city is a reflection, projection or project of bodies'. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1995), p. 381.

clamour by suppressing her own expressive register and perfecting coquettishness: 'I had learned to speak little and in a thoughtful manner, never to hurry, not to run even for a bus, but rather to draw out as long as possible the time for reaction, filling it with puzzled looks, uncertain smiles' (DA, 12). Marriage to Mario had trained her further: 'my voice held back in my throat so I would not make a spectacle of myself' (DA, 12).

Olga's fear of becoming a 'spectacle' or a public figure of shame, is at first a major focus for her, but her decades-long process of tone-policing and foreclosing anger is violently torn apart by Mario's departure.[84] She falls out with 'spies' and 'false friends' whom she suspects are enjoying the spectacle of her collapse, preferring to see 'the satisfied faces of people who do nothing but fuck' (DA, 27). However, her sense of social stigma is swiftly overtaken by rage, fracturing her intricately curated brand of femininity. In the past, she tells us, she enjoyed the 'masculine freedom' swearing gave her, and now, she gives in to it once more: 'In the course of a month I lost the habit of putting on makeup carefully, I went from using a refined language, attentive to the feelings of others, to a sarcastic way of expressing myself, punctuated by coarse laughter. Slowly in spite of my resistance, I also gave in to *obscenity*' (DA, 26, my emphasis).[85]

As I have discussed, dialect and verbal vulgarity are indicators of disgust in all of Ferrante's narratives, but they are nowhere so violently portrayed as in Olga's story.[86] Unlike Delia in *Troubling Love*, who operates with a kind of cool antagonism, Olga is such a

[84] Ferrante refers to her own tactics for avoiding social and familial conflict, 'I reined in my tongue, I was polite and compliant. Yet secretly I was bad' (Fr,113).
[85] In *Holy Shit,* Melissa Mohr writes that while most speech is controlled by the 'higher brain,' swearwords occupy, '"the 'lower brain," the limbic system, which broadly is responsible for emotion, fight-or-flight response, and the automatic nervous system, which regulates heart rate and blood pressure.' See Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 5–6.
[86] As previously noted, the Neapolitan dialect represents disgust in Ferrante's novels. Vulgar or rude terms are analogous with a 'frullato' of disgust, a milkshake of sexual fluids and waste excretions. (see *Troubling Love*).

charged character that the reader is unable to turn their head away.[87] Her switch to loud vulgarity is one of the ways in which Ferrante works to disrupt systems of heteronormativity so that she and her readers are able to examine the female subject within them. In the passage quoted above, Olga describes her lewdness as a capitulation, a giving in, but it is also characterised as a continual sense of falling, into a hole, or abyss. Olga describes this sensation in chapter 20: 'After months of tension I had arrived at some precipice and now I was falling, as in a dream, slowly, even as I continued to hold the thermometer in my hand, even as I stood with the soles of my slippers on the floor' (DA, 101). Downward trajectories, the descent of characters into cellars, tunnels and basements as a process of breakdown occur frequently in Ferrante's work, relating to what Elizabeth Alsop in her essay 'Femmes Fatales' calls 'evolutionary backsliding' – but also echoing mythological descents into the underworld for potential transformation.[88]

Accompanying the downward slide into abjection and disgust is a voice fulminating against possible extermination.[89] 'The speech act,' writes Sara Ahmed, 'can work as a form of vomiting, as an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating'.[90] Mario's replacement of Olga with a younger woman (the daughter of a family friend he coached in maths), is a direct hit to her selfhood; in a bid to deflect the shattering betrayal, Olga uses words furiously, reactively, in vomit-like outbursts, no matter how misogynistic. She frequently refers to Carla as a 'slut' or 'whore', associating her with a

[87] Ferrante's publishers Edizioni E/O, were initially cautious about publishing her second novel because of Olga's perceived neglect of her children, but it was a best seller in Italy for over a year.
[88] Elizabeth Alsop,'Femmes Fatales: "La Fascinazione Di Morte" in Elena Ferrante's L'amore Molesto and I Giorni Dell'abbandono', *Italica*, 91.3 (2014): pp. 466–85. (p. 477).
[89] Alsop is fascinating on the subject of Ferrante's representation of 'falling women' in her books. She proposes that it is just as much about subverting literary convention and expectation than anything else. She writes: 'Thus, Ferrante's willingness to represent 'falling' women could be seen to reflect her desire to actually exorcise this plot (along with its sub-plots of surrender, psychosis, or self-sacrifice) from the field of fiction'. See Alsop,'Femmes Fatales', p.479.05/06/2025 17:26:00
[90] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 94.

sexual baseness and conjuring images of the sacred family space defiled by the profane. 'She was flaunting herself like an impudent whore with my things, which would later become the things of my daughter […] The bitch. So she thought she had full rights to take my place, to play my part, the fucking whore' (DA, 70). On Mario, she wishes 'a terrible pain in his prick, disfigurement of syphilis, a rot throughout his body, the stink of betrayal' (DA, 78). Alsop proposes that Ferrante's novels betray a marked fascination with the themes of death and collapse, and that in their struggle for survival, both Olga and Delia in *Troubling Love* use 'idiolects of defence', where language becomes a 'stop-gap between self and nothingness'.[91]

Olga's inward expression of her graphic thoughts, of the couple having sex, is no less violent in its disgusted response than in her spoken obscenities. She visualises them ('every spasm of my suffering coincided with a spasm of their pleasure'; DA, 76) in a way that at first lends them an imagined glamour in their former friends' eyes: 'They prefer new light-hearted couples [...] How often did they fuck – I wondered with unbearable pain – how, where'; DA, 27). Then, 'Mario's woman. I imagined her ripe, in a toilet, her skirt hiked up, he was on her working her sweaty cheeks, and sinking his fingers in her ass, the floor slippery with sperm' (DA, 22). The images that assault Olga often verge on the pornographic ('They kissed, they bit, the licked, and sucked, tasting the flavours of the cock, the cunt'; DA, 27), the violence of her language signalling her inner desperation.[92] It is not entirely clear at first how Olga's new 'black mania for destruction' (DA, 70), or her violent thirst for revenge, will help her to rebuild any autonomy, but there are some small foreshadowing signs of the potential for renewal in her crisis. Differing

[91] Alsop, 'Femmes Fatales', p. 474.
[92] Olga invokes vengeful black magic at times: 'I am the queen of spades, I am the wasp that stings, I am the dark serpent' (DA, 76).

from Freud's more passive notion of hysteria in his female patients, where he proposed that libidinal suppression provoked an inward spiral of masochism, Ferrante's depiction of Olga's fury offers a more nuanced model of rage which expresses itself outwardly in verbal aggression. In chapter 8, Mario, on his first visit home, is repelled by Olga's new coarse demeanour, threatening to leave if she doesn't use a more 'civilised' tone. She responds with, 'What words should I use for what you're doing with that woman! Let's talk about it! Do you lick her cunt? Do you stick it in her ass [...] However, in order not to disturb the gentleman, not to disturb his children, I'm supposed to use clean language, I'm supposed to be refined, I'm supposed to be elegant! [...] Get out, you shit!"' (DA, 39-42). As Olga points out Mario's hypocrisy, we share a sense of retributive glee at her rage, at this indication of the end of her passivity.

Vulgar language helps Olga in other instances of predatory male surveillance too. In chapter 13, after her front door stops working, two locksmiths arrive and begin a pathetic show of phallic innuendos about locks and keys. 'What could they read in me?' she thinks, '[…] That I hadn't slept with a man for almost three months? That I wasn't sucking cocks, that no one was licking my pussy? That I wasn't screwing? Was that why those two men kept speaking to me, laughing, of keys, of keyholes, of locks? (DA 59-60). Her retort is 'so foul mouthed that the two looked at one another, perplexed […] and began to work more quickly' (DA, 60). This is another instance of Olga using the language of patriarchy more forcefully than her male counterparts. Although the kind of grim catharsis Olga may feel in her outbursts is short-lived and she acknowledges that the violence of her language will backfire in the end – 'I could say cunt and cock and asshole, they were not marked by it. *I marked, I disfigured*' (DA, 84; my emphasis) – but in the storm of her suffering, she gains some temporary relief by meeting the men's words with her own violent ones. As readers,

we glimpse a sense of something more affirmative that she cannot yet feel: by crudely exposing their suggestive misogyny, she widens the space for her own transformation.

Alsop suggests that Ferrante to some extent explores women's culpability in their fates, the part they play in their own failings: 'women are always at least somewhat complicit in their own descents […] In this sense*, I giorni* may be less about the trauma of abandonment, than the even greater risks of self-abandonment'.[93] When Olga admits that she smoothed over her more vulgar character traits within her marriage, this is indeed an admission of culpability. But using crude language is her first step towards dismantling the myths and beliefs that have structured her life. Swearing, particularly in the first half of the book, is a form of radical rebellion against the persona she created; it is a necessary conduit for her rage as well as, ultimately, a palliative force, clearing space for rumination and change. Despite the unravelling effects of her anger, Olga remains fully conscious of what is happening to her, fretting and analysing herself in a mania of words and thoughts. Her analysis become a redemptive self-commentary, as she works to inch open further chinks of meaning for herself in the storm of her suffering.

1.Violent acts

In her essay 'Margins, Subjectivity and Violence', Maria Morelli briefly cites the work of the philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who describes a 'subtle, "symbolic" level of violence – one that is not perceived as such, as it is the by-product of a social "habitus"

[93] Alsop, 'Femmes Fatale*s',* pp. 480–81.

(that is, an interiorised norm) of both the oppressor and the oppressed'.[94] Mario's destructive act breaks apart the internalised norms of the couple's marriage, its inequities of power and status, triggering a reactive violence in Olga. She is more violent than any other character in the *Cronache*, closest in this respect to Lila Cerullo in the Neapolitan Quartet. Olga's violence is directed both towards others – Mario and his girlfriend, her neighbour Carrano, the dog Otto – but also against herself. In numerous instances of self-harm, she bloodies her own nose, slaps herself and instructs her daughter Ilaria to cut her with a paper knife. The resurgence of physical aggression from her teens, what she calls the 'stubborn charge of animal energy', (DA, 97), while reactive, also seems self-annihilating. Freud's notion of the death drive ('the aim of all life is death'[95]), as explored in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', is that of a trauma experienced internally, leading to self-destructiveness, but also, in a re-enaction of the trauma, directed outwards in aggression.[96]

Ferrante describes Olga's response as a 'coming apart', which 'lets filter in fantasies, beliefs, emotions and buried feelings, a *physical primitivism* that, yes, weaves its own strands, difficult to control but without transcendent results' (Fr, 78). Tiziana de Rogatis extends Ferrante's notion of Olga's unravelling as a kind of physical primitivism, by describing it as a process of 'bestialization'.[97] Olga quickly sheds the idea of feminine hygiene, stops shaving, stops washing and shits alongside Otto in the park, these new feral traits establishing a road map that leads to physical aggression. As Ferrante writes, 'Human beings give the worst of themselves when their cultural clothes are torn off', and there is

[94] Morelli, *Margins, Subjectivity and Violence*, p. 332. Citing: Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 11.
[95] Freud, *The Essentials Of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 246.
[96] Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 218. (post-Freudian thought refers to the death drive as '*Thanatos'* although Freud himself did not use this phrase.)
[97] Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 105.

an end-game type nihilism to Olga's feelings that culminates in a street attack when she unexpectantly spots Mario and Carla window shopping in chapter 15 (Fr, 86).

In the same moment that Olga sees the pair, she realises that Mario's attraction to his young pupil likely began five years earlier. This is painfully reinforced by the sight of Carla wearing her own earrings. The symbolism of the heirloom jewellery (belonging to Mario's grandmother), once again strikes the nerve of ancestral lineage, its pollution by an outsider, and provokes a killing instinct in Olga:

> I came up behind them. I struck him like a battering ram with all my weight, I shoved him against the glass, he hit it with his face. Perhaps Carla cried out, but I saw only her open mouth, a black hole in the enclosure of her even, white teeth. Meanwhile I grabbed Mario, who was turning around with frightened eyes, his nose bleeding, and he looked at me full of terror and astonishment at once…His health had evidently been revitalized, he had a good tan, he was thinner, only a little ridiculous now, because one arm was covered by a whole, nicely ironed sleeve, with part of the shoulder still attached, and the collar, too, at an angle; while otherwise his torso was bare, shreds of the shirt hung from his pants, blood dripped amid the grizzled hairs of his chest (DA, 70).

Ferrante portrays Olga's aggression with filmic precision, so close that Carla's mouth is seen as a gaping black hole against her white teeth.[98] The beats of Olga's revenge are mixed with some visual black humour too. Mario looks like Carla's father ('he seemed an old man beside her; DA, 69), his grey-haired chest is left bloody and his elegant shirt is ripped off at the shoulder.[99] It is the first time Olga has seen Carla for years, 'her body that was rich in gentle curves, the curve of her long neck, of her breasts, her hips, her ankles' (DA, 69). Menninghaus observes that the ideal vision of uncontaminated beauty is one of

[98] 'The grotesque face' writes Bakhtin in his study on Rabelais, 'is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss'.[98] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 317.
[99] Wood, 'Women on the Verge', *The New Yorker.*

youthfulness, the uninterrupted line, typified in classical statues of Apollo or Aphrodite, where 'elastic and slender contours without incursions of fat, flawless youthful firmness' are 'at the same time prescriptions for the avoidance of disgust'.[100] It is this vision of beauty that Olga disfigures:

> I wanted to rip them off her, together with the ear, I wanted to drag along her beautiful face with the eyes the nose the lips the scalp the blond hair, I wanted to drag them with me as if with a hook I'd snagged her garment of flesh, the sacks of her breasts, the belly that wrapped the bowels and spilled out through the asshole, through the deep crack crowned with gold. And leave to her only that which in reality she was, an ugly skull stained with living blood, a skeleton that had just been skinned. Because what is the face, what, finally, is the skin over the flesh, a cover, a disguise, rouge for the insupportable horror of our living nature. And he had fallen for it, he had been caught. (DA 71-72)

Olga's fantasy about skinning and disembowelling Carla not only serves to dehumanise and objectify her, the disfiguration feeds into Olga's deathly visions and her new borderless state of being; also, as she feels dead, her wish is for Carla's death too. The young woman's face is re-imagined as a 'carnival mask' (DA, 72) on a skinned skeleton, her beauty aligned with death, just like Olga's imagining of her own body as a porous maternal lump.[101] Ferrante continues to disrupt any enjoyment of idealised beauty, beauty that is smooth, hairless, orifice-less, by showing her protagonist's thirst for revenge and a violent urge to destroy the object (Carla) which is threatening to destroy her. Carla's golden beauty may

[100] Menninghaus, *Disgust,* p. 7.

[101] Olga's attempt to associate Carla with something foul, echoes Bataille's surreal and repellent use of language, especially Olga's desire to pull out Carla's innards through her 'asshole, the deep crack crowned with gold' (DA, 71). The dark satire of the young woman's golden-tinged orifice bears a resemblance to Bataille's essay 'The Solar Anus' (1931) in which he mixes the erotic life-giving energy of the sun with the basest of all the human organs: 'The *solar annulus* is the intact anus of her body at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is night.' Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Theory and History of Literature, vol 14, trans. by Allan Steokl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr., 6th edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 9.

be apparent to Mario, but she is also a lump of flesh, capable of being turned inside out on a butcher's block, as Olga notes: 'Because what is the face, what, finally, is the skin over the flesh, a cover, a disguise, rouge, for the insupportable horror of our living nature. And he had fallen for it' (DA, 72). Carla's beauty, deconstructed surgically here by Olga, is a ruse, a swindle. The tension or oscillation between repulsion and attraction, the mix of beauty with skulls, skeletons, bladders and guts, the waste and putrefaction that informs Ferrante's early work, is important with regard to embodied female subjectivity. In a chapter titled 'The Poetry of Putrefaction', in his book on disgust, Menninghaus posits that disgust works as an anti-illusional breakage device: 'Disrupting the very form of aesthetic illusion, the disgusting is a powerful intermitting agent.'[102] Ferrante uses disgust in the same disruptive way – she neither allows her readers to bask in Carla's beauty nor enjoy the erotic thrill of her lust-fuelled romance with Mario.

Ferrante also aims to subvert the stereotypes of saintly, self-sacrificing wifehood. Her characters are complicated and capable of violence; as I have indicated before, the author seems to lean energetically into her character's extremes. James Wood suggests that there is also a palpable authorial enjoyment by Ferrante of her characters' excesses: 'what is thrilling about her earlier novels is that, in sympathetically following her characters' extremities, Ferrante's own writing has no limits, is willing to take every thought forward to its most radical conclusion and backward to its most radical birthing'.[103]

Olga's lurch towards aggression is shocking; she beats and kicks Mario to the ground, but he recovers and flings her away like an object, plummeting Olga into her most intense feeling of abjection. 'He grabbed me and pushed me away as if I was a thing. He had never

[102] Menninghaus, *Disgus*t, p. 139.
[103] Wood, 'Women on the Verge'*, The New Yorke*r.

treated me with such hatred' (DA, 72). She feels like laughing but admits she has also been completely debased by the experience. Just as her words will hurt only her, her aggressive acts will continue percolating into her own body.[104] The pressure of the scene, one of the most violent and prolonged in all of Ferrante's work, is unsparing and there is a feeling that the violence could reach worse levels. As Olga remarks, 'A woman can kill easily on the street, in the middle of a crowd, she can do it more easily than a man' (DA, 72).

Violence continues into the next chapter (17), when Olga decides to seduce her neighbour, a musician who falls victim to her 'vivid, electric shocks of rage' (DA, 50). Carrano, though a fussy dog hater, is also a talented musician who is sensitive and thoughtful, but nonetheless appears to become a proxy target for Olga's hostility. When she goes into his flat, she is comforted by the atmosphere (foreshadowing the quiet, nurturing romance that she will have with him later), but quickly ignores her feeling of relief, and finds herself chaotically telling him her woes, weeping, as he listens to her attentively. But the scene is soon permeated with disgust as we are directed by Olga's eye to Carrano's unappealing physical traits: thin ankles, aged neck, hotel slippers, timidity. She needs to prove that she is still attractive to men, wants an energetic fuck, but Carrano, described as a man of 'dubious erections' (DA 135), with an 'ever weaker squirt of sperm' (DA, 50), is unlikely to deliver. He is seen as an easy target and Olga has pondered about him before with a sharp edge of comic misandry, 'What were his secrets of a man alone, a male obsession with sex, perhaps, the late-life cult of the cock' (DA, 50).

[104] Both Georges Bataille and Mikhail Bakhtin place laughter at the centre of their social theory. 'As a universal mode of degradation and exaltation, of foolish licence for freedom and unofficial truth, Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter does consistently recall the taboo to which it owes its existence.' See Menninghaus, *Disgust,* p. 335.

As elsewhere in the *Cronache*, Ferrante creates an uncompromising scene of sexual disgust, sadomasochistic impulses and bestial intimations. Sharing similarities with the prolonged scene of bleak sex between Delia and Polledro in *Troubling Love,* the description unfolds over several pages and Ferrante does not spare the reader its bleakly humorous details. Carrano, whose saliva tastes alien to Olga, has a tongue which is 'slightly rough, alive […] animal, an enormous tongue such as I had seen, disgusted, at the butcher, there was nothing seductively human about it'; nonetheless she answers with her own tongue's invasion, 'as if I were following something to the bottom of his throat and wished to catch it before it slid into the oesophagus' (DA, 80-81). Olga is appalled when Carrano keeps losing his erection; his penis is described as 'a small pallid sex, lost in the black forest of hairs, between […] heavy testicles' (DA, 85) – but even he admits she was a fantasy for him, and that the reality falls short. Shame repeatedly floods the scene.

Meanwhile, Olga is tortured by Mario and Carla in her head. She can hear traces of the sounds of their love making, she can even smell their sexual activity in Carrano's front room. But she retains her aggressive stance, while at the same time degrading herself - "'Let's get it over with […] do you have a condom?"' (DA, 84). Carrano, who is increasingly intimidated by Olga's orders, is subtly portrayed as a kind of Nick Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'gray' in colour and 'braying' as he ejaculates prematurely (DA, 86). Ferrante's skill is in making this scene extraordinarily mimetic and credible, while at the same time, and at different moments, comic, tragic and abusive. Olga gradually retreats from her aggressive fury into a well of deepest abjection. It is during her final demand for anal sex that she realises how far she has fallen. 'I was suddenly afraid, I held my breath. A bestial position, animal liquids and a perfidy utterly human. I turned to look at him, perhaps to beg him not to obey me, to let it go' (DA, 87). William Miller writes that the

anus is considered 'the essence of lowness, of untouchability, and so it must be hemmed in with prohibitions […] Even those penetrations consented to and not forced lower the status of the person so penetrated'.[105] The word 'perfidy' here, used by Olga to describe herself, is used only once elsewhere in the novel, about the *poverella's* vile husband, who has 'perfidious green eyes' (DA, 16).

As the book moves towards its end from chapter 23 onwards, Olga retracts from physical violence towards others, to acts of self-harm in an increasingly dissociative state. She slides paper clips into her skin to help her 'remember' and asks her young daughter Ilaria to slice her with a paper knife. These wounds act as anchors, as if Olga is literally disappearing, and pain is the only sensation that can keep her ontologically grounded. Olga tells Ilaria that the cuts are needed because she is too distracted, but Ferrante herself explains the essential importance of these moments of cutting between mother and daughter: 'The request conveys two important things: that Olga intends to resist in every way possible the looming loss of herself: and that, to react, all she can count on is that small female creature who follows her around the house, wavering between devotion and hostility' (Fr, 184). The novel is a process of Olga's constant unravelling which does not stop until it threatens to undo her completely. While her thigh drips with blood from a wound, Ferrante's deconstructivist logic is applied to Olga's face, unhinged by the key which cannot open her front door. The description is a further image of unpeeling, unravelling – similar to Olga's vision of disembowelling and skinning Carla in the fight scene – a surreal representation of complete disassociation from her own body which now contains, a 'monstrous futurist indecipherability' (DA, 164):

[105] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 100.

> It was finding an outlet in my face, tearing it like a can opener, and my teeth…were being unhinged from the foundation of my face, taking with them the nasal septum, an eyebrow, an eye, and revealing the viscid interior of head and throat…I immediately pulled my mouth away from the key, it seemed to me that my face was hanging to one side like the coiled skin of an orange after the knife had began to peel it (DA, 142).

Ferrante's violent image is the final fantasy of disfiguration in the novel. Shortly afterwards, Olga's dog (bought by her husband) dies, and with this, comes the realisation she has stopped loving Mario, a man of 'banal fantasy' (DA, 131). At this point, the waves of Olga's violence and obscenities begin to recede.

4. Dissolving borders

4.1. *Destructive fusion: the porous female body*

As discussed in my first chapter, Kristeva's idea of the abject, in its most elementary form, relates to food loathing such as the skin forming on milk, or a disgusted response to filth and body waste such as sperm, menstrual blood, shit, and ultimately, the maternal corpse. The borders keeping these fluids and matters separate or hidden, to avoid disgust, have to an extent policed Olga and Mario's marriage, leaving their bodies to meet and intermingle in more palatably. When Mario leaves however, these controlling agents and borders collapse, allowing in torrents of undesirable fluids and forces. Olga, whose body now feels porous and depleted, is shocked to notice that Mario's looks better since the split, tanned,

leaner, 'younger, better cared for in his appearance […] rested' (DA, 38). Invigorated by sex, he appears to show no sign of their decades-long *fleshy* contract, with no remaining shreds, no visible legacy of *herself* in him: 'In his body, in his face, there was no trace of our absence.' (DA,38). Mario, however, has left an overflow of remnants in Olga — his fluids, his words, his power — and her struggle is to expel them from her psyche and her body.

One of the key topoi of this novel then, and Olga's primary struggle, is the negative intercorporeal encounter that happens when bodies invade and inhabit one another, leave legacies, traces and then cut ties to establish new territories. Carla's body has crashed into Mario and Olga's ancestral and biological lineage which continues the theme of intrusion, expulsion, and replacement – she becomes matter in a place to which she does not belong. In this same genetic arena, Olga expresses horror at the possibility of contagion, of fluids mixing between her children and Carla. 'I didn't want Carla to touch them, the mere idea gave me shivers of disgust […] her hands are smeared with the semen of her lover, the same seed that is in the blood of my children' (DA, 104). Olga's sense of the couple as genetic interlopers, who are defiling the sacred family line with their lustful comingling, relates to Mary Douglas's fundamental proposition about dirt or pollution as a substance in the wrong taxonomic box: 'uncleanness is matter out of place'.[106] Douglas writes that, 'For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement'.[107] In Olga's view, Carla is spoiling established territory. The following extract interpolates her disgust with Catholic iconography and ritual:

[106] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 50.
[107] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* p. 9.

> What did she have to do with it, the dirty whore, what did she have to do with that line of descent. She was flaunting herself like an impudent whore with my things, which would later become the things of my daughter. She opened her thighs, she bathed his prick, and imagined that thus she had baptized him, I baptize you with the holy water of the cunt, I immerse your cock in the moist flesh and I rename it, I call it mine and born to a new life. The bitch (DA,71).

The violent invasion of youthful life that Carla represents for Mario horrifies Olga, who is repulsed at the potential for the genetic intermingling with her family, paranoically imagining that Carla will soon attract her son too: 'Gianni would conceive hidden desires for her, dreaming of her from the depths of the amniotic liquid in which he had swum. Into my children Carla's parents would be introduced, the horde of her forebears would camp with my ancestors, with Mario's…'(DA, 168). Olga is acutely aware of incestual proximities in her family line, describing herself as 'the body of incest […] the mother to be violated, not a lover' (DA, 92). At the point at which her daughter Ilaria tells her mother that she has seen Carla's breasts in the shower ('prettier' than her mother's), and admires Carla's blonde public hair, we feel Olga's connection to her previous life is finally severed. She is being supplanted, erased, her flesh abandoned by husband and even children, signalling both a physical and metaphorical death.

Ferrante uses Olga's predicament to explore and disrupt the uneasy relationship between disgust and desire in women's identities; deathly images frequently creeping into her depictions. Going back to Mario's first visit home in chapter 8, Olga tries to show him that she is still 'the only possible incarnation' of his fantasies but her period starts, one of Ferrante's disruptive signifiers to crack the picture of contrived femininity (DA, 37). Her skin bears a sallow cadaverous tinge, heralding the first instance of putrefactive imagery in the novel, a visual trope relating to mortality. Olga begins to associate her own flesh, too, with

death, telling us, 'If I could conceal from myself the impression that the life had been drained out of me like blood and saliva and mucus from a patient during an operation, maybe I could deceive Mario as well' (DA, 38). As Kristeva has it, the ultimate symbol of the abject is the mother's corpse and Mario hints that Olga's body has come to represent not only something banal to him, but a kind of macabre clock running down time for him: 'a meter of life, which runs along leaving a wake of anguish' (DA, 40). Temporality and death are both attributed to her body which infuriates Olga, 'You mean that I brought you anguish? You mean that sleeping with me you felt yourself growing old? You measured death by my ass, by, by how once it was firm and what it is now?' (DA, 40).

But, as if contaminated by the views of those around her, Olga's perception of her body worsens as the novel goes on, inspiring only disgust in her, as if surveying a body on an autopsy table, a 'sack of living flesh, packed with waste, bladder bursting, stomach aching' (DA, 95). She is just an oozing object fed upon by Mario and her children and this apocalyptic imagining of herself reaches its most acute point in chapter 18, while cleaning up her feverish son Gianni's vomit:

> I was like a lump of food that my children chewed without stopping; a cud made of a living material that continually amalgamated and softened its living substance to allow two greedy bloodsuckers to nourish themselves, leaving on me the odour and taste of their gastric juices. Nursing, how repulsive, an animal function. And then the warm sweetish odor (sic) of baby-food breath. No matter how much I washed, that stink of motherhood remained. Sometimes Mario pasted himself against me, took me, holding me as I nearly slept, tired himself after work, without emotions. He did it persisting on my almost absent flesh that tasted of milk, cookies, cereal, with a desperation of his own that overlapped mine without his realizing it. I was the body of incest, I thought, stunned by the odor (sic) of Gianni's vomit, I was the mother to be violated, not a lover' (DA, 91-92).

The impression conjured up is perhaps Ferrante's most horrifying depiction of the maternal body, Kristeva's key symbol of 'death infecting life'.[108] The theme of borders being breached is repulsively drawn here, as gastric juices, baby food, regurgitated food, breast milk, converge and ooze through a skinless lump, an amorphous cud with a spongy porosity, linking to Kristeva's notion that the 'abject *is* the border'.[109] As discussed in my first chapter, since the 18th century discourses around the maternal body have constructed it as leaky and unstable. The comparison of Olga's body as a feeding station for both husband and babies suggests an incestuous proximity. There is no sign of the protected body in charge of its own subjectivity here, what Kristeva calls its 'own and clean self'.[110] Mario's rejection has thrust Olga into a state of complete abjection, forcing her to view her body as sexless and functional, turned inside out and borderless. Sara Ahmed's exploration of disgust's grim effect, its obliteration of the normal separators of interior and exterior self, object and subject, is useful when considering Ferrante's image: 'It is not that the abject has got inside us, the abject turns us inside out, as well as outside in'.[111] We should remember that Olga's surfaces are portrayed as permeable in other instances in the novel too. She has frequent sensations of queasily merging with mirrors, walls, keylocks and even the stinking, diseased body of her dying pet dog Otto. This is where her feelings of disgust combine with Ferrante's other key disorientating feeling of *smarginatura* – dissolving margins or boundaries – where the self becomes overwhelmed, untethered, in perpetual drift.

[108] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
[109] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.
[110] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 53.
[111] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 86.

Thus Ferrante's narrative approach mixes iconoclastic and morbid imagery with representations of the female body, but it also unexpectedy opens up a discursive space which fuses both the disgusting *and* the life-giving. The substances and smells that repel our human sensitivities – baby vomit, gastric juices, bodily stink and waste, sperm and ovum – are also what sustain and create life. As William Miller writes, 'What disgusts, startingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life. Images of decay imperceptibly slide into images of fertility and out again'. The horrors of death and decay, part of Miller's 'circle of eternal recurrence', become a constituent part of 'rankness, excessiveness, a certain kind of disorderly productivity and reproductivity that passes beyond lushness into the rankness of surfeit'[112] and have fascinated many writers who in their own way try to subvert the very taboos that, as Mary Douglas asserts, 'depend on a form or community-wide complicity'.[113]

A more creative imagining of what is considered repulsive is explored in Menninghaus's chapter, 'Holy Disgust (Bataille) and the Sticky Jelly of Existence (Sartre)', in which he refers to the writing of Georges Bataille, whose essays offer an 'affirmative aesthetic of the repellent', the vulgar and the profane.[114] In his lecture, 'Attraction and Repulsion II' (1938), Bataille claims that 'I believe that nothing is more important for us than that we recognise that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust'.[115] Like Ferrante, he centralises the significance of disgust, and like her, is fascinated by the oscillations and allure between repulsion and

[112] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust,* pp. 40–41.
[113] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. xii.
[114] Menninghaus, *Disgus*t, p. 343.
[115] Denis Hollier, ed. *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, Theory and History of Literature, vol 41, trans. By Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p.114.

attraction, putrefaction and regeneration.[116] Ferrante is also interested in confronting taboos, using visceral language to describe her protagonists' lives, but her framework puts women at centre stage, making disgust a tool to highlight the violations and pressures in their lives, while aiming to radically dismantle the regulatory codes around them. She aims to liberate her characters, even if it is through a temporary loss of their senses, through bad behaviour, or violence.

Ferrante's female subjects perpetually spill over the boundaries assigned to them, making new formations. Olga begins by viewing her physicality through a lens of paralysing repulsion, but she learns to gradually accept her body. In a scene near the end of the novel, she locks herself in the bathroom and devotes herself to something she 'had never done': 'long detailed, obsessive examinations. I touched my breasts, slid my fingers between folds of flesh that curled over my belly, I examined my sex in the mirror to see how worn out it was' (DA, 153). She feels little pleasure in these observations, but there is no longer a sense of horrified repulsion or a deathly response either, just a grim accepting pragmatism emerging, a reconciliation with her newly grounded flesh.

[116] Bataille's ideas, however, offer little to illuminate female subjectivity as they are often caught up with misogynistic, objectifying and essentialist views of women.

4.ii. Constructive fusion: the '*poverella'*

Emilia, the *poverella* ('poor thing' or 'poor woman'), a woman from Olga's past, emerges as a key figure in both her unravelling and her recuperation. Unlike Mario's unwanted legacy and Carla's malign entry into Olga's consciousness, Emilia eventually becomes a positive somatic influence for Olga. Described as 'the abandoned wife' of Piazza Mazzini, Emilia, is recalled as a voluptuous energetic woman with 'a good smell, as of new fabric', married to a sweaty man with 'a red face, as if from some skin disease' (DA, 15). Once he leaves her for a woman in Pescara, Emilia not only loses her sanity, but her sensuality: 'the fullness of her bosom, of her hips, of her thighs […] she became transparent skin over bones, her eyes drowning in violet wells, her hands damp spider webs' (DA, 16). At first sympathised with by the Naples community, Emilia gradually becomes a source of shame and revulsion, stigmatised too, for the eight-year-old Olga who, on observing her daily, admits that she too felt disgusted at the woman'*s* sorrow ('A grief so gaudy began to repel me'; DA, 16). Olga's mother is repulsed by her daughter's fascination with Emilia; when they hear of the *poverella's* drowning near Capo Miseno, her mother unexpectedly punishes Olga, refusing to let her out of the flat. Olga recalls: 'Sometimes she gave me the feeling that she didn't like me, as if she recognised in me something of herself that she hated, a secret evil of her own' (DA, 52).

But Olga and Emilia become linked in the story and for a while, they seem to be travelling on the same trajectory of death and despair. The *poverella* returns to observe Olga's suffering, haunting her, sometimes weeping, at times coolly bearing witness to her own brand of madness, in locations inside and outside the flat, on Mario's chair in his

office, fusing with Olga's reflection in the mirror. The *poverella* is uncanny, witchlike at times, appearing to have some control over Olga's responses and reactions. Crouching on the stairwell after Olga's degrading sex with Carrano, she is heard saying the enigmatic words, 'I am clean I am true I play with my cards on the table' (DA, 87), as if reminding Olga of the duty of self-respect. The *poverella* also warns her of danger, that her son is ill, that her dog is dying, but in some instances provokes her into physical aggression. In chapter 11, after recalling Emilia's suicide, Olga falls into manic laughter and beats her dog in front of a mother and child. Later, as Otto dies by poisoning, Olga, convulsed with guilt, sinks her hands into his diseased fur, and the *poveralla* appears again, greenish in colour, with her foot on his body, a 'sentinel' of death just as Olga once described herself (DA, 31).

At first, Emilia is a totally abject figure. She is described by Olga's mother as being as 'as dry now as a salted anchovy' (DA, 16). Her 'good smell' long gone, the anchovy simile is extended to metaphor as the child Olga, following her as she struggles to shop for her four children, notices that Emilia's 'eye sockets' are 'eyeless, her gait shambling. I wanted to discover her new nature, of a grey-blue fish. Grains of salt sparkling on her arms and legs' (DA, 16). In his discussion of disgust, William Miller observes that good smells have been seen as curative, but bad smells are assumed to be carrying disease or are undesirable: 'The linking of olfaction to the sexual has a long history […]The unrelenting misogyny is still there: it is always the odors (sic) emitted by women that kill male desire'.[117] Fishy smells and imagery are frequently attributed to Emilia so that in the text she becomes symbolic of decay, a rank object, past freshness. For her community and in Olga's memory, she signifies the opposite of desire and acts as a visual reminder of social expulsion.

[117] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 70.

In *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993), Barbara Creed writes 'The monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order', drawing attention to the system's 'frailty', as well as evoking 'the natural animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage […] from birth through life to death'.[118] Misogyny doubles in force as women age; Menninghaus explores how for philosophers of the 'masculine imagination' – from Kant to Freud, Nietzsche to Bataille —nothing typifies disgust as much as the 'vetula' or disgusting old woman: 'She is the embodiment of everything tabooed: repugnant defects of skin and form, loathsome discharges and even repellent sexual practices – an obscene decaying corpse in her own lifetime […]the disgusting has the attributes of female sex and old age'.[119] Ferrante plays with the associations conjured up by these misogynistic notions of the revolting or rejected female. Emilia is neither old nor disgusting but ages in grief, losing her curves, so that she comes to be seen as such. No longer desirable to one man, she becomes surplus to all.

By the end of the novel, however, the *poverella* is radically transformed. If, at first, Emilia represents a kind of shadow self for Olga, she eventually becomes a 'symbolic mother',[120] a redemptive figure and reparative force in the story, appearing to fuse more sympathetically with Olga's psyche than her own hostile mother does.[121] In her essay 'On Becoming a Hag: Gender, Ageing and Abjection', Susan Pickard explores the notion of the hag as a source of terror in Ferrante's *Cronache*. 'Represented by the symbolic figure of the hag, the old woman is a source of primal fear which forms the foundation of a violently

[118] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 83.
[119] Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 7–8.
[120] Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 15.
[121] Olga's mother is only referred to once or twice in the novel, as a figure of fear and cruelty: "Stop or I'll cut off your hands," she would say when I touched her dressmaking things. And those words were a pair of long, burnished steel scissors that came out of her mouth, jaw like blades that closed over the wrists, leaving stumps sewed up with a needle and thread from her spools' (DA, 102).

misogynistic gendered (self)formation'.[122] Pickard shows how Ferrante moves her characters from the notion of the dejected 'hag' (abject victim) to a more dynamic notion of the 'Hag' – still considered monstrous, still an outlier to socially designated models of femininity, but offering an alternative, powerful subjectivity, the shift to which is away from 'an oppressed/fragmented' state and into 'a powerful/integrated subject position'.[123] Ferrante reclaims the expelled *poverella*, transforming her into someone instructive, talismanic, whose tragedy is repurposed and trauma is softened through empathy in Olga's imagination. Towards the end of the novel, Emilia fuses with Olga's reflection in the mirror: 'Looking hard into my half face on the left, at the changing physiognomy of my secret sides, I recognised the features of the *poverella*' (DA, 124). As Olga assimilates the woman into her skin, a positive symbiosis occurs. 'Her profile […] had been huddling in me for years' (DA, 124), she admits; Olga's heart beats in Emilia's chest, Emilia writes in Olga's notebook and a blood exchange or two-way transfusion happens: 'She was keeping herself alive through my veins, I saw them red, uncovered, wet pulsing. Even the throat, the vocal cords, even the breath to make them vibrate belonged to me' (DA, 126). As Olga absorbs Emilia internally into her archive of experience, she is not consumed or depleted as she is by Mario or Carla; the melding enables individuation, they remain simultaneously separate versions of themselves. It is, as Ferrante herself writes in her recent book, *In the Margins. On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing* (2022), a kind of foreshadowing of the relationship shared by Elena and Lila in the *Quartet*: 'a sort of mutual necessary otherness, describing, that is, a bond between two people merged with one another but not reducible

[122] Susan Pickard, 'On Becoming a Hag: Gender, Ageing and Abjection', *Feminist Theory*, 21.2 (2020), pp. 157–73, (p. 157). Pickard also draws on Barbara Creed's notion of the 'monstrous-feminine' in films and also, Simone de Beauvoir's notions of 'immanence' and 'transcendence' – which I have not detailed here.
[123] Pickard, 'On Becoming a Hag', p. 158.

to one another'.[124] Once again, a figure of fear and disgust is redeemed through Ferrante's narrative lens – the *poverella* is no longer the weeping, depleted version of herself, but sagacious, a kind of transfigured guide for Olga's own odyssey.

5. Common ground: anger in *Black Figs* and expelling legacies

In her book on disgust, Eimear McBride refers to the 'meatification' of women's bodies: 'how has it become so passe for the bodies of half of the world's population to be born, reared into adulthood, live, work, reproduce, die under the assumption that while they know themselves to be flesh, they may just as easily find themselves condemned to be viewed, and treated, only as meat?'[125] McBride borrows the term 'meat' from Angela Carter's work on the Marquis de Sade and pornography, which explores different associations made between 'meat' and 'flesh.' McBride writes:

> The notion of the female body as meat has been so widely disseminated and comprehensively accepted, over so many generations and across countless eras of social and political upheaval that even now, whenever the meat reveals itself as not only conscious – and conscious of the inequities to which it is being subjected – but also unwilling to accept the grill, it can still cause *pandemonium*.[126]

The 'pandemonium' suggested by McBride, which erupts when the female subject refuses to play along with heteropatriarchal expectations of womanhood or motherhood, is also

[124] Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (Europa Editions, 2022), p. 39.
[125] Eimear McBride, *Something Out of Place*: *Women and Disgust* (London: Wellcome Collection, 2021), p. 28.
[126] McBride, *Something Out of Place*, p. 62.(my emphasis)

explored to an extent in my novel. How does a woman react to a range of subjugations, big and small, while struggling with postpartum depression? In El's case, she expresses her anger through violent thoughts and acts which accumulate and worsen as the novel goes on. Her actions unsettle those around her: she smashes a giant insect in front of her horrified child and his friend, she swears constantly, she hits her son, she bites her husband's hand so hard it bleeds, she tries to drown her rival Juno in a sea pool, and then attempts to jump from a high rock in front of them all. All these acts are fuelled by self-disgust and fury at her own feelings of dissolution, constituting a kind of existential lashing out.

As the narrative begins, we discover that El is acutely visually preoccupied with others, but also that she feels she is being watched and monitored, by her husband, by her friends, by an imagined collective male gaze. The weeks and months after giving birth can be a period of extremism, when state control, exercised through the medical profession, as well as through community and family, becomes fixated on women's flesh. Physical changes in the body — prepubescence, menopause, new motherhood — are junctures where women's bodies and actions are intensely scrutinised. Taking on a mother's role often signals the unsettling 'slide into deeper patriarchy' that Rachel Cusk describes, where new and unexpected divisions of labour become apparent, and women's autonomy is undercut by the demands of child rearing.[127]

El is intensely ontologically aware, her body feels raw and painfully vulnerable at the surface of its skin. She is both traumatised and furious; she tells us, 'I move along with a hormonal feeling that I want to punch myself. Or someone else. I'm poised to fight, even

[127] Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 11.

with the baby in the sling' (BF, 85). Having given birth for the second time, she suffered a badly managed episiotomy and is haunted, not just by the terrible details of the birth, but the casually cruel hands of the doctor examining her before she was induced:

> the doctor seemed to be using the whole strength of his fist to try and break the amniotic sac, as if he was working against the clock. My feet shook in the stirrups, and I knew what one foot wanted to do, rise up and boot his civilised head away really hard. Bloody that aquiline nose. But no, I let him grind his hand into me. I noticed his chic pinstriped suit and striped, pink tie. He was probably going out that evening, to the theatre or opera, after sweeping his way around the department. At one point I screamed out and he muttered an apology. The sac stayed intact, and they split me open anyway (BF, 105-106).

There is also a scene where she is asked when she will have sex again by her female GP, revealing the inherent impatience from the medical profession for women to get back on the sex treadmill, perhaps to quickly become 'meat' again.

> So, the docs say, have you thought about contraception? Well, no I say, my baby's barely a few months old, I'm sore, it's still a butcher's shop down there, the last thing I want is the thing which made the baby in the first place, pushing its blind way back inside me. I would rather put a gun into my mouth and blow my brains out, so don't ask me about men and their cocks (BF, 105).

There is a sense of ever-diminishing autonomy as the demands on her body and others' needs fills her with increasing revulsion: 'Inside me was a dependent being who needed me. And outside too, Tom's need for me seemed greedy and unmanageable. I wanted rid of them both, for my life to become singular once more' (BF, 72-73). The revulsion gives rise to feelings of violence and aggression. But the fury is often misdirected, at herself, or worse, at others, who become proxies for her rage, such as her husband Tom,

when he wants to have sex again. 'Without thinking, I lean in my face close to his and snarl. Reflexively, he shoves my face back with his hand onto the bed so it's hard to breathe. I bite into the side of it, and he yelps as my teeth sink in further. He forces my jaw open and yanks his hand out' (BF, 125-126). She admits she enjoyed the feeling of hurting him and would have liked to go 'down, right to the bone' (BF,127).

Lashing out at the wrong person becomes habitual behaviour for El, such as with Juno, when El is actually angered by Charlie's cruel secret rejection of her years before. She first fantasises about cutting Juno's head in half with the broken edge of a plate: 'I see myself standing up and then bringing one of the plates down onto her head, cleaving it neatly in two to get a fascinating bisection of the livery rigging and pinkish brain folds' (BF, 116). Later, she tries impulsively to drown Juno in a sea pool, at the end of a day when she has plunged into a completely disassociated state, after another clear rejection by Charlie.

> Just as the white flash of shin and the bottom of her feet disappear into the tunnel, I reach down under the water and snatch one ankle. She tries to kick out, I pull her back. Juno's strong and it takes some effort to keep her foot in my grip. I move down and grab the other foot too, my knees scraping forwards on the stones, and I smash my temple against the rock above the tunnel. 'Fuck!' Her feet jerk and kick. My face boils as I work against any movement, aching to hold her as still as I can for a couple more moments. *Hold her, it won't take long, hold her.* But I let go (BF, 146).

El completes her transformation into an anti-hero here and the reader's empathy may inevitably fall away at this point. There is an energy in El's descent, though, and I wanted to lend her humour and give readers the uneasy feeling of curiosity to see how far she would go. Repulsive anger gives El a blackly humorous lens and a kind of expressionistic vigour. Disgust and feelings of abjection can lend a grim energy to those experiencing it; both Julia Kristeva and William Miller have pointed to its liberating potential, its strange

expressive 'jouissance'. Miller writes of the 'interpretively rich universe of the disgusting where 'we have the most embodied and literal of emotions, and yet even when it is operating in and around the body, its orifices and excreta, a world of meaning explodes, colouring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social and moral orderings. Disgust for all its visceralness turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions'.[128]

Uncontrolled laughter may seem a strange affect to align with the notion of disgust. Ferrante uses incongruous laughter in a number of ways: as a feminist subversion of expected behaviour, as well as to denote loss of control, explosiveness, chaos; her characters' expressive laughter becomes a powerful, unsettling force.[129] The writer Elizabeth Correll argues that Ferrante's laughter contains a libidinous defiance, producing, 'a form of visibility'; it also lets the reader in on the joke, giving them insight into the character's internal volatility. She notes that 'Laughter is portrayed as a tool to achieve a kind of bodily autonomy and imbued with a latent eroticism that transforms these women into a spectacle'.[130] In my own novel, El's laughter is more ugly, desperate, a grim by-product of inner revulsion, denoting a transgressive move beyond pleasure into pain. El sabotages herself because she is spilling over with self-loathing; she laughs unhappily, giggles for too long, so others stop laughing. Her laughter is defensive as well as aggressive, warding against a black abyss, a battle against the submergence which seems to claim her at the end of the novel.

[128] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, p. xii.
[129] Helene Cixous reimagines the female monster Medusa's with a similar outburst of transgressive humour, 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. See Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 885.
[130] Elizabeth Correll, 'Laughter is a short, very short, sigh of relief': On Elena Ferrante's Subversive Laughter', (Oberlin College, Ohio, USA, 2019), p.4. (I was given permission to quote from this excellent unpublished essay by Correll, after seeing it referenced by Stiliana Milkova's in her book, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*).

The struggle against stasis is explored too by Ferrante who prefers the furious energy of her protagonists' outbursts, as they 'plunge down the path of suffering without paying attention to the "right way"', rather than having them remain in the same traps as their forebears. 'Better to make a mistake with the incandescent lava we have inside,' she writes, 'better to provoke disgust with that, than to assure ourselves success by resorting to murky, cold finds' (Fr, 123). Her characters' rage, their refusal to capitulate, marks them out from their mothers; unlike their mothers they would rather become transgressive and radical. The legacy of Olga's marriage to Mario, the powerful memory of the *poverella* as rejected womanhood, and the patriarchal controls of Olga's early girlhood (in what we must assume is the 1950s), have all combined to weave themselves into an internal archive of knowledge and experience, some of which Olga must expel. The constant work of avoiding bodily revulsion has long been the work of her marriage, but the affect of disgust allows her to see how its parameters have policed her bodily habits: 'From the moment I fell in love with Mario, I began to fear that he would be repelled by me. Wash the body, scent it, eliminate all unpleasant traces of physiology […] I never left the bathroom until every bad smell had vanished, I turned on the taps so he wouldn't hear the rush of urine…I thought of beauty as of a constant effort to eliminate corporeality' (DA, 94).

At first, as I have discussed, Olga's anger appears to follow a trajectory of despair and violence. But gradually, as the violence abates, the rage becomes more reflective, and Olga begins to examine and shed a number of personal, cultural and historical legacies from her body. This forced contemplation begins with reflection on the neglect by her own mother and her memories of rebellious girls at her school, including a dancer, who, 'to scandalise us, or to disfigure the image of elegance that remained in the boys' doltish eyes […] made bodily noises according to how she felt, with her throat, her ass' (DA, 97). For

Olga, particularly, acknowledging that she has been damaged and defined by the parameters of Mario's desire, not her own, is shocking, pessimistic, and yet, transformative.

> Everything was so random. As a girl, I had fallen in love with Mario, but I could have fallen in love with anyone […] and instead he's just a reed that emits sounds of falsehood, you don't know who he really is […] We are occasions. We consummate life and lose it because in some long-ago time someone, in the desire to unload his cock inside us, was nice, chose us among women. We take for some sort of kindness addressed to us alone the banal desire for sex. We love his desire to fuck, we are so dazzled by it we think it's the desire to fuck only us, us alone… We give it a name, that desire of the cock, we personalize it, we call it my love. (DA, 74)

Elizabeth Alsop refers to Olga's process of self-scrutiny as part of Ferrante's enabling, 'deconstructive logic […] that her protagonists must work through existing systems to cobble their own'.[131] Other women, both real and literary, abandoned like the *poverella*, or more liberated, assemble like Russian dolls inside Olga, but in the end, enhance her survival: their 'ferocity', Olga says, 'is in my flesh' (DA, 97).

Julietta Singh's meditative book, *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018), takes its summons from the political theorist Antonio Gramsci, who urged writers to compile 'an inventory of historical traces' within themselves and this is what Olga does through the novel.[132] Singh refers to her own bodily archive, from physical surface scars and flaws to

[131] Alsop, 'Femmes Fatales', p. 470.

[132] Singh quotes the following passage from Antonio Gramsci: 'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you and infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory…therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory'. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. By Quintan Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publications 1997), p. 324

the internal layers of identity and cultural knowledge deposited in her: 'An infinite history of traces without an inventory! An endless collection of oneself that is impossible to gather.'[133] She explores how personal, cultural, historical and colonial legacies leave traces good and bad: 'For better and for worse, we are made up of an outside world which constitutes, nourishes and poisons us in turns'.[134] Similarly, Olga's unravelling is as much research project as mental breakdown, but she is really just at the start of her own personal 'compilation' of archival material. What this new knowledge will bring her is unpredictable; Ferrante ends the narrative soon after Olga's crisis, while her insights are still smouldering. It's hard to know how or when her new scepticism will result in long-term positive outcomes but at least have led the way out of chaos for now. She is calmer at least. El's struggles have not made her calm, but numb, nor does her internal archive seem to be showing her a way forward out of her crisis.

At the end of the novel, we might well feel dismayed at Olga's new meekness. She is not quite as passive and reduced as El is at the end of *Black Figs*; the visceral horrors may have dissipated, but so too, it seems, the fire and electric shocks of insight. There is no suggestion that Olga will become a writer again; she accepts a job translating, and seems to mutely accept the love of Carrano, living quietly within the relationship's new parameters, admitting she doesn't quite believe its truth herself. Her state at the end of the novel in some ways echoes El's passivity, although holds little of its nihilistic atrophy. We also have no idea whether El in my novel *Black Figs,* will go back to work or find any sustenance in connecting to others outside her family as she once did. Whether either of the women will recover their energy, jouissance or positively influence those around them, especially in

[133] Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 1st edition (Punctum Books, 2018), p. 18.
[134] Singh, *No Archive,* p. 30.

Olga's case, her daughter Ilaria and the next generation of young women, remains uncertain.

III. DISGUSTED AND DISGUSTING MOTHERS IN *THE LOST DAUGHTER*

'The hardest things to talk about are the ones we ourselves can't understand' (LD, 10).[135]

At first glance, *The Lost Daughter* (*La figlia oscura*, 2006), picks up many of the core themes that Ferrante began exploring in the first two books of the *Cronache*. In *Troubling Love*, Delia explodes in disgust at her mother and in *The Days of Abandonment,* Olga rages in disgust at her husband and her domestic role; in both books, motherhood and the maternal body are important foci. Here, in the third book of the trilogy, shorter than the other two at just 140 pages, Ferrante closely examines disgust with mothering itself.

The common ground with my own work is that both Leda and El in Black Figs share an abhorrence of process of pregnancy and gestation, its invasiveness and the chaos it wreaks on the body and psyche. El is appalled that her body becomes a juncture for others to medically butcher, prod, examine and comment upon; intellectually driven Leda is appalled by the way her body is reduced to a biological, animal state as her second daughter grows inside her. And, treading into another taboo of motherhood, *The Lost Daughter* explores maternal desertion, what Leslie Elwell calls 'Leda's cultural crime', and is perhaps Ferrante's most nihilistic view of motherhood.[136]

Leda is less sympathetic than Ferrante's other *Cronache* creations: she is neither a traumatised daughter mourning for a dead mother, nor a wife left by her husband for a

[135] Ferrante states of this quote from *The Lost Daughter* that, 'It's the motto – can I call it that? – at the root of all my books'. Ferri, Sandro and Ferri Sandra, 'Elena Ferrante: The Art of Fiction No.228', *The Paris Review*, 2015 <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6370/the-art-of-fiction-no-228-elena-ferrante> (accessed 26 January 2024)

[136] Leslie Elwell, 'Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's The Lost Daughter', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 237–269, (p.238).

younger woman, but a mother who is pleased to be separated once again from her daughters, whom she has left once before to pursue her career, and whom she confesses to finding boring and self-indulgent at times. Elwell suggests that Leda is aligned with a 'masculine position […] refusing to sacrifice her ambition to her child'.[137]

The plot follows Leda, a forty-eight-year-old professor of English Literature, taking a summer holiday alone to the Ionian coast in the early 2000s. Her daughters, Bianca and Marta, now in their 20s, have moved to Canada with their father Gianni. Once in the coastal town, Leda settles in to reading books for the autumn term, in a state of 'unusual wellbeing'. 'No one depended anymore on my care,' she announces 'and, finally, even I was no longer a burden to myself' (LD, 12). But once at the resort, she encounters a cast of characters who increasingly disturb her equanimity: an elderly caretaker called Giovanni who wants to seduce her, a beach boy called Gino in whom she has a flutter of both erotic and maternal interest, and a Camorra family from Naples, including a young mother, Nina, and her toddler Elena, with whom she becomes increasingly obsessed. Leda sees the woman as her younger self, befriends her, over-identifies with her and later in the book, offers Nina her flat to make love with Gino, a holiday fling to offer escape from what Leda sees as an oppressive life. But as she tries to manage Nina's future, Leda begins to mentally unravel; the Camorra family chip away at her central philosophy, a complete disavowal of dependency, and she becomes increasingly involved with their dramas, first voyeuristically, and then disturbingly, by the memories they provoke. Leda is contradictory and impulsive; irritated by Elena's fixation on the doll 'Nani', she steals it from the beach and hides it, she takes Gino for a drink and seems confused about whether she desires him or thinks that

[137] Elwell, 'Breaking Bonds', p. 248.

her daughters would; she is repulsed by Giovanni's advances but still allows him to cook for her and cuddles up to him afterwards; she is disdainful towards the Camorra family, but also admits to one of the women (the heavily pregnant Rosaria) that she is a terrible mother. At the end of the novel, she confesses to stealing Elena's doll but shows little empathy for Nina's upset (who responds by stabbing her with a hat pin). The novel ends with Leda talking to her daughters on the phone, still bleeding, and stating: 'I'm dead, but I'm fine' (LD, 140). With this short sarcastic line Leda points to the questions at the centre of this novel: Is it possible for a woman to live productively, to feel truly alive, when she has severed the bonds with her children? How to remain intact as an individual when inextricably caught between, as de Rogatis puts it, the 'difficult coexistence of two opposing states: motherhood and womanhood'.[138]

In this chapter, I will explore the way in which disgust operates in *The Lost Daughter*, illuminating feelings of maternal ambivalence, neglect and desertion. I will show how the affect begins in Leda's responses to sights and signs until her determinedly outward looking gaze turns inwards, propelling her into a confrontation with the past. Rather like the start of a psychological horror film, the book at first conveys a sense of calm; cracks and signs of discord emerge only in gradual increments. Prompted by these unsettling signs, Leda begins to recall her mother's rejection of her, and her own guilt at the neglect and desertion of her daughters.

The book is carefully layered with Ferrante's characteristic tropes of disgust, which serve as forewarnings or proxies for the tumult inside Leda's unconscious: dead insects, rotting fruit, oozing wounds, toddler snot, mouth-like dark gaping bruises that appear on

[138] de Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 94.

the skin. More repellence builds around the centrifugal object of the doll Nani, after Leda steals it, its red lips vomiting black fluids, sea worms, rot and slime. Some of these signs and objects, including Nani, relate to Freud's essay, 'The Uncanny' (1919), where the 'uncanny' is described as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was well known and had long been familiar'.[139] In the essay, Freud refers to automatons, waxworks or dolls that appear to be animate or to contain a life force, blurring the line between the living and the non-living. This happens at moments to the doll Nani as Leda watches it, leaving her deeply unsettled. Freud's sensation of uncanniness provokes unconscious feelings that are somehow linked to, or substituted by, particular objects, injecting those objects with a new eerie menace ('the frightening element is something that has been repressed […] and now returns'[140]). For Leda, Nani and the other repellent objects and sights she observes gradually excavate a series of memories of both of her failings as a mother and of the cold neglect she endured from her own mother.

1. Rotting fruit and dead insects

As an academic with bourgeois tastes, Leda leans towards aesthetic beauty and order. She has an intense way of scrutinising her surroundings and becomes dissatisfied when the picture spoils or cracks. When she arrives at her holiday flat, she is allured by a showy bowl of fruit as glossy as a painting ('the tray shone as if in a still life') but on a later, closer inspection, she finds that the fruit is mouldy underneath: 'I took a knife and cut off large

[139] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by Hugh Haughton, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 124.
[140] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 147.

black areas, but the smell disgusted me, the taste, and I threw almost all of it in the garbage' (LD, 13-14). Stiliana Milkova suggests that Ferrante enacts the 'literal meaning of disgust as *distaste*',[141] through Leda, and that this 'scene is infected through the aesthetics and iconography of the still life or *natura morta*, a visual trope most familiar to us from Dutch painting' where 'images of rampant life doubled as signifiers of death'. Flies or other insects would feature in these seventeenth-century paintings 'to demarcate the instant that precedes decay and to remind the viewer of his or her mortality'.[142] In fact, soon after disposing of the decaying fruit, Leda finds a 'giant fly' (a female cicada), whose abdomen has exploded on her clean, white pillowcase:

> It was dark brown, and motionless, with membranous wings. I said to myself: it's a cicada, maybe its abdomen burst on my pillow. I touched it with the hem of my bathrobe, it moved and became immediately quiet. Male, female. The stomach of the females doesn't have elastic membranes, it doesn't sing, it's mute. I felt disgust…I cautiously picked up the pillow, went to one of the windows, and tossed the insect out. (LD, 14)

To be disturbed for a second time so soon after finding the rotting underside of the fruit, is significant, recalling Kristeva's account of the abject, where repellent jettisoned objects beckon to us repeatedly, no matter how much we try to sublimate them: 'And yet from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master'.[143] The female insect's silence – a reminder of the silence surrounding the taboo of having abandoned her children – also disturbs Leda and relates later to the passivity of the doll she steals, which has its own brand of muteness.

[141] Disgust: Middle French: *desgouster*, deriving from Latin gustus, meaning 'taste'
[142] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 99.
[143] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p. 2.

In the *Cronache*, Ferrante uses frequent references to insects or to the insect-like qualities of characters, creeping or darting movements, stickiness or viscosity, invoking feelings of revulsion and horror.[144] The writer's memories of her own childhood are pertinent to the prominence of insects in her texts. In *Frantumaglia*, she recalls a dark box room in the Naples flat of her childhood, a room which terrified her because she believed it contained a monster, the 'beast in the storeroom'. A bad smell and cold draught (in reality, the insecticide DDT), which she described as breath from the beast's mouth, 'ugly as the yellowish larva of a cicada, ready to devour me' emanated from the room when the door was open (Fr, 110). In Ferrante's memory, the room contained an 'enormous fly with long transparent wings […] In his large belly there is room for at least two little sisters' (Fr, 112). She is so scared that the giant fly will eat her siblings, that she locks herself in the room while her sister has a tantrum outside. The box room is associated with a wide range of unconscious feelings and impulses for Ferrante, feelings that are simultaneously protective and murderous (she had a desire to kill her younger sister), disgusted and eerily sexualised. In the memory, once inside its dark walls, she admits she is only saving her sister from the fly because she is terrified of the 'physical disgust' she would feel at the sight of her body mangled to 'a bloody pulp' (Fr, 114). Ferrante also fantasises about locking her mother in the room to be eaten by the fly as she is fearful of being abandoned by her: 'When the door of the house closed behind her elegant body, I was gripped by panic' (Fr, 118).[145]

[144] In Ferrante's first novel, *Troubling Love,* Caserta and his son Polledro move like sticky arachnids, Caserta and Amalia are both depicted with red, snake-like tongues and crawl spider-like across the cellar of the sweetshop where Delia was abused; woodworms munch in panelled walls and insects and dead flies cluster on yellow paper in butcher shops; lizards and ants swarm through Olga's apartment in her second novel, *The Days of Abandonment.*

[145] At this point in her childhood Ferrante says, she began to see human relationships as duplicitous, mask-wearing, built on 'chains of guilt,' and consequently to even view herself as 'a beast who pretends to be tame' (Fr, 113).

Thus, the disgusting images of flies and cicadas hold a particular symbolic association for the writer, of death, guilt and disgust. Leda's response to the insect world is described by Ferrante as 'the disgust induced by taboos' (Fr, 221), and the feeling of instability when taboos are breached:

> For Leda everything that refers to our animal nature is repellent. The relationship we have with insects, with creeping creatures, with all non-human living material, is contradictory. Animals frighten us, repulse us, remind us – like pregnancy when suddenly it changes us, bringing us much closer to our animal nature – of the instability of the forms assumed by life (Fr, 221-222).

In Andras Angyal's classic paper 'Disgust and Related Aversions', (1941), he suggests that much of human disgust focuses on animals or animals waste products.[146] But as the scholar Jonathan Haidt proposes, although core disgust was designed as a food rejection system and is rooted in evolution, disgust, including the 'animal reminder', has been co-opted into a wider cultural and moral matrix: 'We fear recognising our animality because we fear that, like animals, we are mortal'.[147] Repellent sights, such as the insects, are reminders of deathly endings, repeatedly puncturing through Leda's wellbeing and aesthetic desire to curate her environment.[148]

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[146] Andras Angyal, 'Disgust and Related Aversions.', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 36.3 (1941), pp. 393–412.

[147] Jonathan Haidt, Sumio Imada, Clark Mccauley and Paul Rozin, 'Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality', *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 9.1 (1997), 107–131 (p. 115).

[148] The authors also cite Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death* (1973) stating: 'Becker's thesis is that the fear of death and insignificance is the greatest fear haunting humans. Human culture and heroism are, in large measure, attempts to deny or repress the fear that, ultimately, human life is pointless and brief. We fear recognising our animality because we fear that, like animals, we are mortal', see Haidt and others, (p.15).

Ferrante's imagery of insects has a direct parallel to my own work. In my novel *Black Figs*, the insect world features as a squirming backdrop, reflecting the growing turmoil of El's mind. Because she is unravelling, and at times feels suicidal, the ugliness she sees and searches out further fuels her feeling of disassociation and horror. Visions and fantasies become more macabre: the swimming pool becomes a vortex of insect death, a huge basking caterpillar found on the first day by the pool is bludgeoned to death, 'black worms' multiply, wriggle and then drown. As she swims in the pool, El imagines she is wearing, 'a great Edwardian hat […] made of feathers, fur, bits of carrion, in various states of decay as the flies buzz round my head' (BF, 118). The pool gradually fills with muck and kills everything: 'The insects seem to be piling up on the terracotta tiles, little massacre camps of them: wasps, bees, crane flies. We never seem able to catch them all' (BF, 118). Just before a dismal sex scene with her husband, Tom, El spots an unidentifiable insect on the ceiling which prefigures her disgust and reignites the trauma of a botched delivery on her body, 'A large insect skitters above with a brown veined sack on its abdomen, carrying eggs I imagine, to lay in the ceiling rafters, dragging something, another creature to eat or an extension to its body, a kind of twin or dead baby? I felt like that after having Sol, that something else was left hanging out of me, unfinished and unremoved, like a rotting caul' (BF, 123-124). The insect triggers a painful memory, at the same time as accentuating the lack of a clean border between her and the invertebrate world, 'life soup' as William Miller calls it, 'slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming animal life'.[149] The permeability between El and what she sees as nature's repellence, extends to psychological fantasies, where suicidal and murderous impulses invade her mind, propelling her towards disaster.

[149] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust,* p. 41.

Thus, disgust both links to, and provokes an awareness of death, in the viewer, and Leda's response to the giant cicada she finds on her apartment pillow is not only a visual aberration of the order she seeks, but a reminder of mortality. The insect mars the canvas of the clean white bed and its split abdomen signals decomposition, both affronts to Leda's new vitality where she feels she has regained the 'slender body' of her youth and its 'gentle strength' (LD, 11-12). Despite her best efforts to curate and derive pleasure from the scenes around her, the pulse of disgust and with it, reminders of the past, are never far away from the surface. The 'inner landscape, the dark room', the storeroom of the self, keeps sending its provocative signs: mute leaky insects, dusty lizards and flies swarming under café counters.[150]

2. Repellent humans

It is not just insects and objects that disturb Leda, but humans in her vision too. At first, the Camorra family on the beach provide entertainment, like a soap opera, or a tableau with a series of figurines for whom Leda decides motivations. The females particularly hold her attention, including Rosaria, a 'large woman with short legs and heavy breasts […] painfully dragging a pregnant belly' (LD, 17). Leda ascribes to her the role of the sacrificial mother figure, a contemporary Venus of Willendorf: 'I imagine she'll give birth without strain, in two hours *she'll expel herself* and, at the same time, another just like her' (LD, 90, my emphasis). Leda's words echo part of Kristeva's description of the abject where, with respect to food loathing, the 'I' of the self is threatened by the idea or sight of something

[150] Milkova, *Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 97.

revolting and vomits. During this reaction, subjectivity itself is threatened: 'I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself'.[151] Leda's aversion to Rosaria whom she describes as 'ugly and without pretensions' (LD, 30) is similar; Rosaria is simply an animal ejecting a replica self, cancelling herself out at the same time as she gives birth, relinquishing any sense of self-determination at the altar of motherhood. This is a stance Leda is threatened and utterly repelled by (reminding her of her own maternal inadequacies), and also one she tries (and fails) to draw Nina away from. Ironically, Leda's observations of Rosaria's contented fertility will continue to disturb and disgust her, the massive pregnant belly even seems to be observing her with its 'protruding navel like an eye' (LD, 29). Rosaria elicits a 'thread of fury', which hounds Leda through the book, prompting her into subversive acts, which 'unwind(s) precisely from Rosaria's world' (Fr, 221).

Standing out in relief is Nina, a hopeful outlier to the rest of the rowdy clan, who, initially at least, reminds Leda of her younger self. Her unique beauty, a genetic aberration, mesmerises the academic and seems to inspire both her narcissism and desire: 'the slender neck, the shapely head and long, wavy, glossy black hair, the Indian face with its high cheekbones…seemed to me an anomaly in the group, an organism that had mysteriously escaped the rule, the victim, now assimilated, of a kidnapping or of an exchange in the cradle' (LD, 18). Yet on closer view, Nina shows signs of imperfection too: 'She seemed to me less beautiful, not as young, the waxing at her groin had been done badly, the child she held in her arms had a red runny eye, a forehead pimpled with sweat, and the doll was ugly and dirty' (LD, 27). In this way, Nina is narratively linked to the fruit and the cicada in Leda's flat. When her husband arrives, with his, 'large belly […] divided into bulging halves of flesh

[151] Kristeva*, Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

by a deep scar', there is more cause for revulsion, and their toddler Elena is seen licking snot dripping from the tip of her nose (LD, 36). The cracks begin to show and Leda's desire for aesthetically satisfying visual beauty is incrementally broken.

Leda seems to feel these imperfections in people and her surroundings deeply, as invasions. As William Miller notes, 'Disgust helps mark boundaries of culture and boundaries of the self. The boundaries of the self extend beyond the body to encompass a jurisdictional territory […] a territorial preserve'.[152] With her surveying stare, Leda marks out territory on the beach, but it proves impossible to control and the Naples clan continue to spoil the picture with their 'domineering cordiality', in one scene, loudly insisting that the other tourists on the beach move along a few spaces to accommodate them. Leda refuses to do so, noting, 'I opened a book, but by now I had a knot of bitter feelings inside that at every impact of sound, color, odor [sic] grew even more bitter' (LD, 25-26). The family group wrenches her back into the past like a pre-verbal force, slimy and viscid, but also appearing to be crowded inside her: 'I felt them as my time, my own swampy life, which occasionally I still slipped into […] I had them all inside me' (LD, 87). For Andrew Miller, slipperiness and swampiness relates to disgust's 'generative rot' and 'teeming animal life', life-giving although repellent, but Leda has renounced her humble roots and their chaos fills her with shame – the rough Neapolitans are a sharp reminder of what she has othered or made abject.[153]

Leda's snobbery does not go unpunished. After refusing to move on the beach for the family, on her way home through the forest, she is violently struck in the back with by a pine cone that produces a 'livid spot that looks like a mouth' (LD, 33). Later she imagines

[152] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 50.
[153] Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust,* pp. 40–41.

that Rosaria has directed a gang of boys to do this, 'her big bare belly resting like a cupola on her thighs, and pointed to me as the target' (LD, 33). The pinecones leave a dark gaping wound with a sticky residue just like the cicada on Leda's pillow. These signs and instances of leakage – insect fluid, pine resin – produce psychical ripples of disgust and contribute to the breaking apart of Leda's carefully controlled world, a breakdown that relates to Ferrante's state of *smarginatura*, where margins rupture and are breached, leading to what de Rogatis calls a state of 'social derailment'.[154]

3. Physical slippage

On the beach, Leda begins to focus obsessively on Nina, Nina's toddler, Elena, and Elena's doll, Nani.[155] Watching mother and daughter, Leda is repelled by the intensity of their attachment, mother and daughter as a 'single body', showing an 'oblivious symbiosis' of love that is starkly missing from her relationship to her own mother and daughters.[156] She seems surprised that Nina appears 'to have no desire for anything but her child' (LD, 19) but concludes that the affection is a performance, 'not for love of her daughter but for us, the crowd on the beach' (LD, 22). This doesn't stop Leda fixating on their shared physical

[154] Rogatis, *Key Words*, p. 99.
[155] Here, Nani is a reversal of the syllables of the name of Nina and the doll. Slippage between names and pet names – Nani has at least three names – mirrors the slippage/merging of identities between mothers, daughters and dolls, a theme which threads through Ferrante's work. 'For a while I didn't know if it was the mother or the daughter who was called Nina, Ninu, Nine, the names were so many…Then, by listening to voices and cries, I realised that Nina was the mother. It was more complicated with the child…I thought she had a nickname like Nani or Nena or Nenella, but then I understood that those were the names of the doll, from whom the child was never parted and to whom Nina paid attention as if she were alive, a second daughter. The child in reality was called Elena, Lenu…' (LD, 20).
[156] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls,' p. 103.

movements with an almost erotic passion: 'They laughed together, enjoying the feeling of body against body, touching noses, spitting out streams of water, kissing each other' (LD, 19). Later she is also disturbed by Elena's greed for the 'mangy-looking doll, with a half blond, half bald head' and watches the child's uncomfortably intense play: 'she kissed her […] so hard that the plastic almost seemed to inflate as her mouth exhaled her grassy vibrant love […] she kissed her on her bare breast […] on her stomach, everywhere, with her mouth open, as if to eat her. I turned away, one shouldn't watch children's games' (LD, 37-38). In an unsettling and strange moment, Leda sees that Nani appears to animate like the automatons in Freud's account of the uncanny: 'a living force was released. Now it was she who kissed Elena with increasing frenzy […] she pressed her head against the green bathing suit.' Further, Elena appears to become aroused by her playing, 'The child realised that I was looking at her. She smiled at me with an abrasive gaze and as if in defiance hugged the doll's head between her legs, with both hands' (LD, 38).

The doll's dual purpose of play and sexual exploration all the more adds to Leda's agitation when she overhears Nina ventriloquizing a baby voice for Nani, affectedly sighing and mewing with pleasure, then both Elena and Nina using the same voice together: 'They imagined it was the same, single voice coming from the same throat of a thing in reality mute. But evidently, I couldn't enter into their illusion, I felt a growing repulsion for that double voice' (LD, 22-23). The double voice points to the repellence Leda feels for the idea of mother and daughter as one entity or body, her innate disgust with bodily intimacy. She recalls that her mother had refused to play with her or be her doll when she was a child ('My mother had rarely yielded to the games I tried to play with her body'; LD, 46). Although she herself resentfully submitted to being a 'doll' for her own daughters, she seems horrified by the ventriloquism Nina and Elena indulge in, asking in her thoughts that

they ‘give the doll a stable, constant voice, either that of the mother or that of the daughter, and stop pretending that they were the same’ (LD, 23).

Milkova writes: ‘The slippage of categories coincides with the presence of the disgusting, the collapse of the threshold between the mother’s and daughter’s respective voices, bodies and functions’.[157] The lack of separation between mother and daughter, their uneasy convergence, provokes Leda’s deepest fear – a loss of agency. Smarting from the levity of their game playing, and aurally disturbed by the fused murmuring, Leda is thrown back to the dark past, saturated with the language of Naples. The Neapolitan dialect – although provoking pleasure for Leda at first on the beach – has an underside of violence and disgust. ‘Languages for me have a secret venom,’ she tells us, ‘that every so often foams up and for which there is no antidote’ (LD, 20). Leda recalls her own mother’s attempt at verbal decorum which would crack at the first sign of conflict and then she too, ‘clung to the actions, the language of the others, with a violence that was no different’; her repeated ‘“you will never ever ever see me again”’ (LD, 26) terrified the young Leda. Although haunted by her mother’s angry threat of abandonment, equally and conversely, the fusing of Nina and Elena speaks of an unconscionable intimacy for Leda, one that obliterates the self. She would rather be absent, than be a mother like Nina, or worse still, like Rosaria, who has dumbly given herself to animal mothering. Although Leda admits she wanted her first born, Bianca, with an ‘animal opacity reinforced by popular beliefs’, she came to be repelled by the original desire and by the process of her body changing to accommodate the alien presence inside her, greedy, uncontainable and revoltingly animalistic:

[157] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 101.

> A woman's body does a thousand different things, toils, runs, studies, fantasises, invents, wearies, and meanwhile the breasts enlarge, the lips of the sex swell, the flesh throbs with a round life that is yours, your life, and yet pushes elsewhere, draws away from you although it inhabits your belly, joyful and weighty, felt as a greedy impulse and yet repellent, like an insect's poison injected into a vein' (LD, 36-37).

4. Dolls

Dolls are a recurring trope in Ferrante's fiction, serving to explore the complex dynamics of female friendship as well as the relationships between mothers, daughters and the cultural expectations they are expected to fulfil. Little girls are still socialised with dolls, trained to be nurturing, materially linking to what Nancy Chodorow calls the socially determined 'reproduction of mothering' occurring 'through social structurally induced psychological processes'.[158] It is no surprise that Ferrante takes the doll, a potent symbol of mothering, and problematises it in her work, using it to interrogate a whole system of cultural norms for girls and women. In her works, characters play with dolls, throw them down cellars, lose them on beaches, play at being dolls (as Leda does for her daughters) or resist being played with (as Leda's mother does). In darker, more violent scenes, Ferrante's characters lie mute or passive as dolls as they endure male abuse; Elena is held in a spell of repulsed paralysis as she is molested by Donato Sarratore in the *Quartet's My Brilliant Friend;* Stefano Carracci rapes a mute Lila in *The Story of a New Name* after a violent struggle. Dolls also become vessels and substitutes for loss: strangely, in Leda's mother memory of her mother

[158] Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, 2nd edn (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999), p.7.

dying, her mother becomes almost as helpless as a doll with a lack of bodily control, saying in dialect, 'I feel a little cold Leda, and I'm shitting my pants' (LD, 89). Leda reveals that she was given a doll (Mina) as a child, that she adored, and that became a substitute for her mother's body. When Leda's daughter, Bianca, rejects Mina, stripping the doll and scribbling all over it, Leda explodes in rage and throws Mina off a balcony, breaking both the legacy of the doll and any chance of closeness between herself and her daughter. The act of throwing a doll sets the scene for the friendship depicted in *My Brilliant Friend:* Elena and Lila drop their dolls into the dark cellar of the sadistic Don Achille, inculcating a sense of competition and a rupture which tests the bonds of their friendship.

In *The Lost Daughter*, Elena's doll Nani operates in a number of ways*,* both material and symbolic, raising questions about good and bad mothering. In Milkova's view, Nani assumes 'the functions of both daughter and (pregnant) mother', seen also in the syllabic reversal of the names. Milkova adds that 'the doll can be seen as the composite body of all Ferrante's mothers and daughters'.[159] For Elena, by whom the doll is adored, Nani creates a playful and intimate conduit between herself and her mother. For Leda, the doll becomes a locus of darkness or a crucible that ushers in reflections on the past, on the dysfunctionalities in the way she was mothered, and on her own bad mothering.

In a key moment in chapter 10, Leda carries out two acts, one benevolent – she finds the toddler Elena on the beach and returns her to the hysterical family – and one morally repugnant: in the resulting chaos, she steals the doll. At first, taking Nani feels like an impulsive, uncontrolled act, almost comical. Leda even tries to convince herself she has done something 'intrinsically noble,' then it becomes an 'infantile' act, something a child

[159] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 98.

would do innocently: she has simply rescued a dishevelled toy in trouble (as if she was a nurse at a doll hospital) and will return her once she is better. But later, mercurial as ever, Leda admits: 'Compassion doesn't have anything to do with it […] there was no question of a generous feeling' (LD, 45).

The theft throws a grenade into the triumvirate of females. Elena becomes withdrawn and petulant, Nina grows wild with anxiety and starts an affair with Gino, and Leda loses all semblance of her cultivated persona, falling headlong into the hauntings of her past 'crime' of desertion. In an uneasy moment, with the doll stowed away in her flat, Leda meets Nina and Elena, both anxious and exhausted, at in a market. Her false solicitude and underlying sadism are excruciating: 'How are you, sweetie, did you find your doll?' Elena responds with a 'kind of shudder of rage' (LD, 64). Leda, clearly enjoying her role as puppet master, also seems to derive satisfaction as she coolly predicts to the reader that Nina will imminently descend into 'bad mother' territory: 'Soon she'll start yelling, I thought, soon she'll hit her, trying to break that bond' (LD, 67). This is territory she knows well; she admits that she sometimes hit her girls, and that as well as deserting them, she preferred one of her daughters, Bianca, to the other: 'I treated one as a daughter, the other a stepdaughter' (LD, 61).

Time inside the flat seems to collapse during Nani's 'abduction', and Ferrante plays once again with the doll's uncanny qualities, as it hovers between seeming alive and inanimate, moving from different positions and to different rooms. At first Leda mainly ignores Nani as she comes and goes, brooding on her mother's rejection of her: 'I had been certain that my mother, in creating me, had separated from me, as when one has an impulse of revulsion and, with a gesture, pushes away the plate' (LD, 58). More reflection ensues as Nani opens up memories of Leda's pregnancies, her growing disgust with the

gestation of Marta, her second child, and with heredity itself. Leda's thoughts on what is inherited through the genes, whether we are lucky or unlucky, are focused briefly on her daughters, ('To Bianca I gave a large bosom, while Marta seems a boy'; LD, 61), but begin to grow more disturbing when observing Elena: 'with all her ancestors compressed into her flesh, I felt something like repugnance, even though I didn't know what repelled me' (LD, 37).

As Leda is submerged more deeply into the past, she focuses more on Nani, washing the pen off her face, brushing her hair, buying her clothes, entering a dual state of being both child and adult, both daughter and surrogate, 'a mother is only a daughter who plays' (LD, 124). Leda recalls her pregnancies where she defined herself against the generations of mothers before her; unlike Rosaria, or the females in her own family, who were led by animal instinct and emotionality, she was cool and clever, an individual only temporarily assailed by a biological process. 'I was not my grandmother (seven children), I was not my mother (four daughters), I was not my aunts, my cousins. I was different and rebellious' (LD, 122). Having a baby was turned into an intellectual project, a kind of Darwinian exercise in superiority. 'The women of my family swelled, dilated. The creature trapped in their womb seemed a long illness that changed them […] I, instead, wanted my pregnancy to be under control […] I imagined myself a shining tile in the mosaic of the future' (LD, 122). Leda read literary texts to her daughter, Bianca, in the womb, describing her as a 'creature' daughter, but superior, 'being at its best, purified of humors and blood, humanised, intellectualised, with nothing that could evoke the blind cruelty of life matter as it expands' (LD, 122). But her second pregnancy, with Marta, was different; she had no strength to make the second experience 'exalting' and it seemed to ruin the shining legacy of the first. Her body was invaded and her imagination stunted, so that no prose could

'tame the dark beast' that she was carrying: 'My body became a bloody liquid; suspended in it was a mushy sediment inside which grew a violent polyp, so far from anything human that it reduced me, even though it fed and grew, to rotting matter without life' (LD, 123). This raises another mothering taboo, the preference of one birthing experience, one child, over another. Associations from the past conjoin: her mother's rejection, the horrified realisation that, during her second pregnancy, she became as animal and unselfregarding as Rosaria.

Disgust permeates the scene in which Leda helps Nani 'birth' a mass of stinking sea detritus, holding her upside down into the bath. During the symbolic labour, Ferrante amplifies an uncomfortable proximity between Leda, Elena, Nina and the doll. There is a strain of sexual desire in Leda's thoughts about Nina as well as of childish regression, 'I thought of her long neck, her breast. I thought of the nipples that Elena had sucked' (LD,110). Disturbingly, she also pretends to suckle Nani, kisses her mouth hard as she had seen Elena do. The doll answers with an excretion from her belly: 'She emitted a gurgle that seemed to me a hostile remark, and, with it, a jet of brown saliva that dirtied my lips and my shirt' (LD, 62). The 'liquid darkness' in the doll is mirrored by the darkness in Leda's psyche, pregnant with guilty memories, 'I, too, was hiding many dark things in silence' (LD, 100). As Nani vomits out sprays of brown blood-like sand, Leda realises that Elena has put a sea worm inside the doll to make her 'pregnant', and this conjures up frightening memories of the fishermen's worms in the sand when she was a child. The phallic worms and the lips of the doll become phantasmagoric with sexual associations. Past, present and future crash together into the moment where Leda parts Nani's lips to give birth to the 'baby', an engorged sea worm. 'I should have noticed right away, as a girl, this soft reddish engorgement that I'm now squeezing with the metal of the tweezers […]I held Nani's pliant

lips open with my thumb while I operated carefully with the tweezers. I have a horror of crawling things, but for that clot of humours I felt a naked pity' (LD, 124-125). The clot mirrors the mushy 'violent polyp' that she viewed as Marta in her womb; perhaps now she was trying to assuage the guilt and replenish the lack of love she felt for her second daughter. The removal of the worm means Nani is cleaned out, and Milkova suggests that 'This act of evisceration brings about the figurative evisceration of Leda's disgust towards her procreative and motherly role'.[160] The violence of her feelings and memories dissipate from this moment on.

In the final three pages of the novel, Nina comes to Leda's flat to borrow her keys so she can spend time alone with Gino, and they discuss her frustrations and need to 'escape'; Leda gives Nina her address in Florence so they can even be in contact if she decides to study again; the tone is warm, friendly. The scene might have continued in the feeling of mutual *affidamento* between the women, but Leda chooses this moment to reveal that she has Nani and Nina's response is explosive. When she asks why Leda took the doll, she shrugs, 'I don't know'. 'You read, you write all day, and you don't know?' Nina curses Leda and pierces her with the hat pin Leda bought for her as a gift. The scene is non-redemptive and once again, Leda seems oblivious to the upset it will cause Nina and seems willing to destroy an important female bond, now that it no longer seems to serve her.[161] It is on leaving the resort that Leda's car veers off the road and she wakes up surrounded by family. She is not seriously hurt in the crash, but the doctors are puzzled by an 'inexplicable

[160] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 102.
[161] Leda doesn't only fall into the category of a 'bad' mother, there is a further suggestion of sisterly betrayal, when she admits that she never thanked or acknowledged a young English woman, Brenda, who helped her with her academic career. (This is a theme Ferrante picks up in the *Neapolitan Quartet* when Elena's feels constantly threatened by Lila's genius and writing prowess and steals her ideas).

lesion' just above her womb (LD, 10). Leda doesn't say a word about the 'senseless' act which led to the wound puncture, indicating a return to the sublimination of the maternal violence, shame and fear she has been trying to articulate. We return to the dark obscurity at the heart of the novel and Leda's words: 'The hardest things to talk about are the ones we ourselves can't understand' (LD, 10).

5. The final taboo

Ferrante refers to *The Lost Daughter* as the most 'daring, the most risk-taking,' of her work, and admits, 'If I hadn't gone through that, with great anxiety, I wouldn't have written *My Brilliant Friend*' (Fr, 254). Indeed, the novel is significant in Ferrante's work as it prefigures a number of key themes followed through in the *Neapolitan Quartet*, including the central leitmotif of the doll which represents a range of antagonisms towards socially prescribed notions of femininity, daughterhood and motherhood. Like Leda's, both Elena Greco's and Lila Cerullo's relationships with their mothers are hostile and filled with disgust; like Leda, too, both protagonists of the Quartet both are career-driven, ambitious, riskier in their relationships, and practice less sacrificial styles of mothering. In Leda, however, Ferrante shows us a woman determined to shed maternal obligations completely, fulfilling the renouncement of Sibilla Aleramo's 'monstrous causal chain' of maternal servitude.[162] The novel even uses phrasing similar to Aleramo's, when Leda reflects on life as a young mother: 'All the hopes of youth seemed to have been destroyed,

[162] 'Why do we idealise self-sacrifice in mothers? Where does this inhuman idea of maternal self-immolation come from? It has been passed down from mother to daughter for centuries. It has produced a monstrous causal chain'. See Aleramo, *A Woman,* p.208.

I seemed to be falling backward toward my mother, my grandmother, the chain of mute or angry women I came from' (LD, 71). There is above all in the novel, Leda's violent devotion to individualism, to singularity, to the priority of her own desires, even over the needs of her own daughters. When she explains to Nina why she left, she claims they posed an existential threat to her selfhood, 'I loved them too much, and it seemed to me that love for them would keep me from becoming myself' (LD, 117).

At one point in the book, Leda expresses pleasure at the fact that her own daughters look like their father and not like her: 'what I loved best in my daughters was what seemed alien to me. In them – I felt – I liked most the features that came from their father' (LD, 60). This reasserts Leda's central philosophy and drive, her desire for independence, anything to ward off needy miniature versions of herself. She freely confesses, 'I'm an unnatural mother' (LD, 139), and through her, Ferrante deconstructs one of the central tenets of idealised maternity – unquestioning selfless devotion. Leda is flawed, narcissistic, chasing her own ambitions, never happier than when she first escaped her daughters for an academic conference in England, basking in adulation from a famous professor by whom, and by others, she is seduced: 'I had a thousand new ideas, I was studying, I was loving other men, I was in love with anyone who said I was smart, intelligent, helped me to test myself' (LD, 101). In an interview with Sheila Heti in 2016 Ferrante says, 'I've never felt narcissism to be a sin. No, I think it's necessary to be absolutely in love with ourselves […] It's only by turning my gaze on myself that I can understand others, feel them as my kin. The woman who practices surveillance on herself without letting herself be the object of surveillance is the great innovation of our times'.[163]

[163] Heti, Sheila, '"Be Silent, Recover My Strength, Start Again": In Conversation with Elena Ferrante', *Hazlitt,* 2016 <https://hazlitt.net/feature/be-silent-recover-my-strength-start-again-conversation-elena-ferrante> [accessed 1 June 2024].

There are two moments when Leda speaks with complete emotional honesty in the book. One is at the novel's start when she admits to an appalled Rosaria that she left her children for three years for her own survival: 'Sometimes you have to escape in order not to die' (LD 69). Then, towards the novel's end, when she confesses to Nina that she didn't return to her daughters for love, but because life was too difficult without them – she felt 'useless and desperate'. 'I returned for the same reason I left: for love of myself' (LD, 118). Leda can't live with her daughters happily, but is plagued with unhappiness without them and the dilemma floats unanswered in the novel.

Ferrante's struggles with Leda's character and the process of writing her third book are expressed in *Frantumaglia*; working on the novel was like swimming out of her depth, she was exhausted, 'too far from the shore' (Fr, 323). The writing process sent her into an unsettling moral space: 'If Leda couldn't get to the bottom of that act […], an adult, stealing a doll from a child – I was drowning with her as I wrote, and I couldn't get either of us out of the vortex as I had done with Delia and Olga' (Fr, 275). The unusual intimacy Ferrante has to her work, as discussed throughout this thesis, is explicitly shown here: 'If in the first two books I published I was almost frightened by recognising myself in the writing – above all in the use of the double register I mentioned – in the third book I was afraid of having pushed myself too far, as if I could not control Leda's world' (Fr, 274). This 'double register', as noted in my introduction, refers to Ferrante's authorial desire to exist only inside the text, not as a marketable entity in the real world.

Ferrante admits that she worried about the book after it was published: 'I felt I had to return to it. It's no coincidence that when I came to the Neapolitan Quartet, I started off

again with two dolls and an intense female friendship captured at its beginning. It seemed to me that there was something that needed to be articulated again'.[164] Female friendship takes centre stage in the *Quartet*, as does the thread of duplicity between women, friendships that descend, at times, into jealousy and betrayal. Similarly to Leda, the *Quartet's* characters are disgusted by maternal servitude, but also by themselves, by others, by the cultural structures they find themselves in, all themes that germinated in *The Lost Daughter*.

Leda's crimes against motherhood, chasing her own urges and career, abandoning her toddler daughters for three years, favouring one daughter over another, being superior with them as they grew up, stealing dolls from toddlers, may well alienate readers. But according to Milkova, by allowing her characters to behave badly, Ferrante grants 'the subject agency to cross the boundary of what is socially and culturally unnatural'; and 'the disgusting opens space for transgression and liberation'.[165]

Ferrante expands the representation of women in literature by presenting flawed, unlikeable mothers, obliterating the southern Italian ideation of the maternal, the sacred 'mother of church' and of 'the Sunday supplements' (LD, 67). Still, despite Leda's freedoms, the novel's exploration of the struggle between motherhood and personal desire remains unresolved. Perhaps it was with these difficulties in mind that for her next novel, *My Brilliant Friend,* Ferrante chose to turn her gaze from the heat of a conflicted mother's

[164] At the time of its publication in 2006, it was still unusual for fiction to explore maternal hostility from a mother's point of view. In the decades since there has been a marked increase in texts exploring ambivalent maternity, the unnatural or 'bad mother' as I have indicated in previous chapters. But to this day, a woman who abandons her children remains taboo territory, possibly the reason it appealed to Maggie Gyllenhaal when directing the film in 2021.
[165] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 106.

point of view, to a portrayal of female friendship, where mothers, still perceived as disgusting and endlessly problematic, are relegated to the peripheries of the story.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE *CRONACHE* AND *BLACK FIGS*

> 'I'm very attached to forceful women who practice surveillance on themselves and others in precisely the way I'm trying to explain. I like writing about them. I feel that they are heroines of our time. That's how I invented Delia and Olga' (Fr, 105).

In this study, I have tried to show how disgust in the *Cronache* is used by Ferrante in such a way and with such force that it becomes an instructive and at times enabling tool within her stories. Ferrante uses disgust to analyse and dismantle existing models of daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood, allowing her characters to transgress and to assert their agency and individuality. I have explored how Ferrante repurposes the affect as a visceral response to a long set of impositions: domestic entrapment, embodied trauma, misogyny and coercion, abandonment, suffocating maternal love, demanding children, the cult of motherhood. Breaking down the carapaces of femininity is an authorial goal for Ferrante, even if it means breaking down and psychically killing her characters. It is, ironically, the transgression of these norms and expectations that gives the *Cronache* characters their strength, but the process is arduous and messy, breakages are difficult, and self-determination is not always successful, as Ferrante shows us in *The Lost Daughter.* Yet the loathsome affect is an essential component of the radical change needed in her female protagonists' lives.

In contrast to the nihilism and stony bleakness of my novel's end, Ferrante gives us a sense of genuine turning points for her characters at the end of the *Cronache* novels. Delia, Olga and Leda seem to have arrived on the cusp of ontological reinvention and have made agreements with the past. There is a sense of reparation – but also, a healthier space

–between Delia and her mother: 'Amalia had been, I was Amalia' (TL, 139); there is mildness after rage from Olga with boyfriend Carrano, 'and so we loved each other for a long time, in the days and months to come, quietly' (DA, 188); and even taboo-breaking Leda is deeply moved when her daughters ask her if she is 'alive or dead' in excited dialect on the phone (LD, 140).

What remains fascinating is how disgust forms part of the way Ferrante's women look at the world, the intensity with which they examine themselves and others. It is integral to the word 'surveillance', to which Ferrante reclaims from its associations with the male gaze, into something more generative: an 'emotional tendency of the whole body'. Her characters practice 'a conscious surveillance on themselves', which Ferrante attributes more positively to vigour and expansiveness **– '**watchfulness, vigilance, invoking not the gaze but, rather, an eagerness for feeling alive'**.**[166] This expressive, oppositional, albeit frequently disgusted, way of looking, helps them stay alert, even alive. Surveillance, just like the affect of disgust, is repurposed as 'the opposite of the body dulled by sleep, a metaphor counter to opacity, to death' (Fr, 104).

The watchful isolated women of the *Cronache* set the stage for the personal, social and political struggles of the friends in the *Quartet*. Elena and Lila share the same dilemmas, but at least are supported by others in their communities, allowing them to negotiate more freedoms. Yet the intense, agitated and subversive *Cronache* women have not suffered in vain – but have done the essential groundwork for Ferrante's subsequent characters, in the violent and passionate efforts to determine their own lives.

[166] Ferrante's characters' share more in common with the 'oppositional gaze' as proposed by Bell Hooks in her study of black women spectators, than the phallocentric male gaze. bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, ed. by Marc Furstenau (Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

The *Cronache* novels have been powerfully influential on my own writing. They are the dark, unconscious underside of the author's narrative world, more explicitly interior and psychological in mode than Ferrante's later works. When I began writing my novel, they became a touchstone for my own writing practice; *The Lost Daughter,* in particular, shares a similarly acute maternal ambivalence and risky bleakness for the reader that I explore in *Black Figs*. But it was the prevalence of female disgust that first struck me so strongly in these early works. The disgust is still there in the Neapolitan novels, but it's operating at a more subterranean level. Disgust, and the way Ferrante repurposes it in these books, is an expressive tool of resistance that is crucial to Olga, Delia and Leda's survival, eventually becoming a process of depathologisation that allows them to continue living their lives.

However, disgust is not as useful or educational for my protagonist El; she starts and remains contaminated by an overwhelming revulsion towards herself and the world. Her internalised disgust floods her psyche, projecting outwards, focusing her gaze on all potentially repellent sights, constructing what Milkova calls the 'landscape of disgust'.[167] From her first objectifying look at Charlie's nipples at the novel's start ('Unlike most men his age, there's no trace of fat behind the nipple'; BF,9), she begins consolidating an optics of repulsion, which extends from her own body to the bodies of others. El's own breasts are, 'over-stretched […] hijacked, the skin thinned, the veins visible like electrical wiring' (BF,17); and then later, her nipples are described as 'dark brown and doubled in size like great moles' (BF,46). In a particularly acute moment, she surveys her own sex:

[167] Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls', p. 97.

> My cunt: jesus. Semi-prolapsed snail. Permanently splayed, brownish grey, a frilly broken maw. The midwife told me not to look at it for at least six months this time, after all the stitches. It's something else, a thing squashed against a piece of glass, against its will, in protest. It's what you ask for when you stand over a mirror, says Mirror. Just don't do it (BF,34).

In her essay 'Something Out of Place: Women and Disgust' (2021), Eimear McBride explores disgust's tendency to contaminate and smother women's lives, as well as the congenital and culturally determined disgust with any woman's body that is not youthfully ideal: 'Certainly, it performs its abhorrence so diligently – enthusiastically even – that a constant alertness to disgust's objections and proposed limitations has become one of the great, inexorable presences in these lives'.[168] El is on high alert in this way. Her disgusted gaze falls on men too, their 'gestational guts […] male tits pushing out their t-shirts', hairiness ('I wonder how far the growth goes in some men, as if their insides are full of furred tunnels?'; BF, 16-17), her husband Tom's height and physicality ('I see him butting around under other people's armpits'; BF,14), his smell, now repellent to her ('sweat, a faint whiff of ammonia'; BF,16) and his habit of sniffing his used underwear. Even her own children are not spared: her 'hateful' son Jake's 'mouth hanging open, its small dog's teeth, the crimson saliva-webbed tongue waggling' (BF,111). There is also the enjoyment of the frisson of repulsion; her baby Sol's cradle cap, which she finds repellently alluring: 'I glance down at the top of his head to find the greenish craters of cradle cap. I like brushing them up, so they stand like scales. It makes my mouth water' (BF,19).

Unlike Delia in *Troubling Love*, however, whose sense of disgust in the corporeal eventually propels her towards self-validation, El is caught in a state of suspended

[168] McBride, *Something Out of Place,* p. 2.

revulsion. Her self-disgust is yoked to a yearning for the desired, commodified body which Juno possesses, which she thinks will attract Charlie, and which is impossible for her to achieve. As Ngai notes in her exploration of non-cathartic emotions and dysphoric affects: 'Disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as *diagnose* it powerfully'.[169] El has little capacity for manoeuvring. Without the protection of Delia's hard energy, her post-partum disgust leaves her floundering. Her internalised voices echo in a masochistic zoetrope, gradually plunging her down into madness. Juno, her friend's wife, El notes, is 'the better me' (BF,1), superior not only in her head, but in a perceived hierarchical system of beauty.

> Comparisons are just there whether you want them or not, hanging on the air. If they don't come from inside you, the evil inner corsetry, they come from a friend or your group, your place of work, the outside space; from images, from cells, from breathing. They come from looks, greedy glances, eyeballs rotating, flicking and landing like flies. They come from the amount of time men talk to you at a party, from the length of time a man of any age, a woman of any age, looks at you on the street (BF, 83).

El feels strongly that she is being ranked low in a perceived taxonomy of attractiveness. We do not know if this is how others view her in the novel, but El enacts this punishing scrutiny on herself. Sandra Bartky's observation seems apt for El's sense of being surveyed, as well as for the surveillance taking root inside her consciousness: 'The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular'.[170] Bartky argues further that 'In contemporary

[169] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 353. (my emphasis)
[170] Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', *Feminist Theory Reader*, 5th edn (Routledge, 2020), p. 36.

patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other'.[171]

The ending of my novel is much more desolate and static than those of Ferrante's texts. El is blunted by anti-depressants, caught in a purgatorial obsolescence, with barely a glimmer of movement forwards in her marriage; there is even an implication that her formerly tender husband, Tom, is taking advantage of her at times:

> And I let him, sometimes before I'm ready; I think yes, here I am. I know there's some coldness, even roughness, inflicted in this activity, but humans can change colour in an instant, from petting to swiping. When you get up so close to it, love isn't much, it's taking what you want and need in a dark room…Mostly in bed at night though, I feel utterly alone. I blink, I can see my head blinking at itself on the pillow, the small dark skull, and I realise how lost I am, fathoms deep in the house, my body moving apart and seeming to dissipate (BF, 178).

El, exhausted and emotionally numb, may have become for her children what Andre Green describes in his essay, 'The Dead Mother' (1972), as 'an imago which has been constituted in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate'.[172] Whether or not El recovers some of her former energy is not indicated in my book, and we leave her, rather like an abandoned doll, in the dark, barely living, mute. El no longer looks intensely at the world and has retracted inside herself, a pale trace of her anarchic self, stripped of humour. Her only realisation is that it is Juno she misses most of all, a female friendship that she jeopardised and tried to annihilate. This is the most

[171] Bartky, *Feminist Theory,* p. 34.
[172] André Green, *On Private Madness*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 142.

positive part of her descent, that she has found a new value in women, rather than remaining trapped within the precarity of male desire. I wanted a darkness, a stasis, to remain percolating after the last page is turned, and so I settled for a less optimistic view of female rebellion. El may have more in common with the *Neapolitan Quartet's* Lila, who would rather disappear than continue treading through the mechanics of self-sacrificing motherhood and wifehood. It is up to readers to decide whether this is an alternative model of resistance, or just a slow suicidal withdrawal from life.

(ends)

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