THE 'GENIUS FRIEND' AND THE *GENIUS* (*LOCI*): CLASSICAL MEANING OF THE *NEAPOLITAN NOVELS*

ABSTRACT

In my article I investigate the complex meaning of the Italian word *geniale* in Elena Ferrante's tetralogy *L'amica geniale*, employing the Latin concepts of *genius*, *genialis* and *genius loci*. In so doing, this work offers a reappraisal of the title of the series by configuring the intrinsic reciprocity of the protagonists' friendship and destinies as a modern instantiation of the aforementioned classical concepts.

KEYWORDS

Ferrante, *Neapolitan Novels*, *L'amica geniale*, Genius, Genialis, Genius Loci, Geniale, Classical Reception.

The 'Genius Friend' and the *Genius (Loci)*

> «No, non finire mai: te li do io i soldi, devi studiare sempre». Feci un risolino nervoso, poi dissi: «Grazie, ma a un certo punto le scuole finiscono». «Non per te: tu sei la mia amica geniale, devi diventare la più brava di tutti, maschi e femmine». Si alzò, si tolse mutande e reggiseno, disse: «Dài, aiutami, che sennò faccio tardi.» (AG 308-309)

> "No, don't ever stop: I'll give you the money, you should keep studying." I gave a nervous laugh, then said, "Thanks, but at a certain point school is over." "Not for you: you're my brilliant friend, (*in the Italian: la mia amica geniale*), you have to be the best of all, boys and girls." She got up, took off her underpants and bra, said, "Come on, help me, otherwise I'll be late." (MBF 312)[1]

This article focuses on the etymological meanings of *geniale* and of the related term *genio* in the series of four books entitled *L'amica geniale* by Elena Ferrante. The English title for the tetralogy is the *Neapolitan Novels* or, alternatively, the *Neapolitan Quartet*.[2] Importantly, the Italian edition uses *L'amica geniale*, (literally, "The Genius Friend") as both the title of the first book of the series and as a comprehensive one for the whole collection. I posit that the author's use of the words *geniale* and *genio* can only be fully understood in relation to their Latin etymology: *genialis* and *genius*. These classical concepts come to life, in the modern context of the novel, through their employment by the two main protagonists. The Latin etymology of the Italian words is revitalized by Ferrante's profound knowledge of classical culture and literature.

The tetralogy tells the story of a life-long, marvelous and complex friendship between two girls from the same poor neighborhood in Naples: Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo. Elena is the homodiegetic narrator of the story, which begins with her recounting of the disappearance of her friend, when the two are in their sixties. This event opens up the unraveling of a flashback narrative that spans from the girls' childhood (coinciding, roughly, with the 1950s) to 2010.

Following my analysis, Lila can be interpreted as an instantiation of the *genius* of Elena and, relatedly, as a *genius loci* for the city of Naples. My interpretation, furthermore, configures the two protagonists' friendship as a mutual, reciprocal mirroring of beings and of destinies. While offering new classical readings of *genius* and *genialis*, my argument builds on the previous work of Ferrante scholars, including Daniela Brogi, Franco Gallippi, Rebecca Falkoff, Laura Benedetti and Tiziana de Rogatis.

In "Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*: In Search of Parthenope and the 'Founding' of a New City," Gallippi posits that in the *Neapolitan Novels* Lila has the project of founding a new city, which would be connected to the need for a change in the style adopted when writing of Naples. Gallippi sees Lila as the siren Parthenope and confirms this identification through reference to Matilde Serao's *Leggende Napoletane*. Ferrante's use of the Neapolitan myths is certainly also indebted to a XIV Century manuscript entitled *Cronaca di Partenope*, attributed to Bartolomeo Caracciolo or "Il carafa."[3] All in all, my interpretation holds similarities to Gallippi's, but we have different approaches and conclusions. His analysis does not encompass the fourth book of the tetralogy, nor does it account for the fact that the idea of the "city without love" was already present in *Frantumaglia*'s chapter "Le Città." In my thesis, *Donna Ferrante's Library: Resonance of the Classics in the Neapolitan Novels,* I have started from a comparison of this passage from *Frantumaglia* in relation to the tetralogy, underscoring the intratextual coherence in Ferrante's vision of a new feminine foundation of cities. In this article, I have expanded Gallippi's identification of Lila with Parthenope finally showing that Lila can be seen as the *genius* in all of its etymological complexity, from the *genius* of Elena to the *genius loci* of Naples, because of her constitution as an inherently classical character.

Although my focus is on the classical presence in the *Neapolitan Novels*, my comparative approach owes a debt to Rebecca Falkoff's criticism. This is particularly true for my analysis of Ferrante's interweaving of the concepts of *genius* and *genialis* into a twentieth-century plot. Falkoff was one of the first scholars to address Ferrante's German sources. Stefania Lucamante already assessed the importance of Christa Wolf's *Medea* for Ferrante's writing of *The Days of Abandonment*, citing the German concept of "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'the process of getting over the past'" (86) representing a present condition through means of Classical myths. Lucamante argues that in her 2002 novel Ferrante establishes a connection between her protagonist (Olga) and Wolf's

Medea, corroborating the importance of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through allusion to the classical myth of Medea. Spurred by these findings and by the German (and Wolfean) concept of 'getting over the past,' Falkoff also proceeded in a similar direction with her research on Ferrante. In her article "To Translate is To Betray: On the Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US," she bases her comparative understanding of the *Neapolitan Novels* on the identification of Elena Ferrante with translator Anita Raja. In her groundbreaking work, Falkoff has in fact shown how Raja's translation of Christa Wolf's oeuvre, and, in particular, of her novel *The Quest for Christa T.* proved crucial in the devisal of Lila and Elena's problematic relationship. In Wolf's novel, the narrator Christa and her "genius friend" Christa T. are similarly tied to one another, and the narration is also triggered by the narrator's will to find her best friend. For the purpose of my current research, I am not retracing Wolf's influence on Ferrante. Rather, I try to demonstrate that this same doubling, mirroring and mutual emulation in life is a literary image Ferrante transforms and enhances through engagement with classical sources.

Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave is a compound critical analysis of key concepts that Ferrante adopts in the tetralogy. In the first chapter "Una narrazione geniale e popolare" ("A brilliant and popular narration"), De Rogatis shows what Daniela Brogi had previously noted on the narrative structure of the books; the narrative, as well as the thematic crux of the novels lies in the "narrazione polifonica, duale," (41) ("the polyphonic, dual narration" in the "racconto nel racconto" (46) ("tale within the tale") Elena's act of writing is spurred by the very absence of her friend and, all throughout the book, she writes *together with* Lila, or better, basing this writing on the profound differences that spring from a continuous competitive comparison. De Rogatis sees in fact the relationship between the two protagonists as a "*pratica della differenza,*" (57) ("practice of difference") as opposed to the classical ethos of friendship. Because women have been outside of the social realm for so long, De Rogatis argues, and because, as Ferrante herself points out in *La Frantumaglia* (231), the very treatment of female friendship in literature is still unexplored, the author can give voice to this original "amalgama terribile di invidia e riconoscimento elettivo" (58) ("terrible amalgam of envy and elective recognition") De Rogatis defines this friendship, in her subheadings as "creatività" (60) ("creativity"), "identificazione proiettiva" (63) ("projective identification"), "invidia primaria" (70) ("primary envy") "simbiosi e alterità" (74) ("symbiosis and alterity"), and "distorsione e riconoscimento" (77) ("distortion and identification"). In my discussion on the Classical *genius* and the adjective *genialis,* I show how all of these feminist psychoanalytical concepts could derive from the very etymological meanings of the word "geniale."

In my article, I will shed light on the etymological resonance of *genius* and *genialis* in the context of the novels. This, along with the numerous, scattered references to the classical world, elucidates that Ferrante's work is more imbued in this tradition than

previously noted. Moreover, Ferrante has reworked notions of Roman literature and religion in a way that does not conceive of them as mere models. Often the author employs the past as an instantiation of contemporary issues,[4] which are enlivened by etymological and mythical concepts of the Roman past.

Genius* in *genio* and *geniale

Elena Ferrante's interest in the classics is deep, and her works are marked by recurring references to the classical world.[5] In fact, the tetralogy's protagonist Elena Greco[6] attends the liceo classico, a high school that concentrates on ancient Greek and Latin. Moreover, in the course of the series, we see how Elena's *penchant* for the Classics is substantially boosted by her decision to study at the Scuola Normale Superiore, in Pisa. As early as elementary school, both Lila and Elena want to learn Latin, which will come to represent, for Lila, a marker of identitarian difference between her and Elena. Lila will not be able to attend middle school, because of her parents' decision not to invest their money in her preparation for the (Latin) admission test. Interestingly, in the books, not only is Italian deemed a better standard than Neapolitan dialect, but Latin (and, further on, Greek) also comes to symbolize Elena's upward social mobility, through her control of the ancient world's language and culture. In Italy, however, connotations of class distinction have always been attached to the mastery of the Classics. In the *Neapolitan Novels* this is a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of Italian cultural prejudices in the decades that span from the fifties to our own time. Lila's elementary school teacher, Maestra Oliviero, blinded by this cultural prejudice, will disregard Lila from the moment her parents decide not to invest in her future as a student, denying her the possibility of going to middle school and learning Latin. Moreover, although the girl fulfills great goals in educating herself, such as reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*,[7] Maestra Oliviero will never understand Lila's authentic and profound desire to keep on studying. Elena will instead have a different fate, one that is also decided by Lila's symbolic investiture of Elena as the "amica geniale," in one of the two instances in which the syntagm is used. Readers, having followed the story of this friendship through Elena's eyes, are shocked as much as she is in hearing this, because they share Elena's sense of inferiority towards Lila. In other words, everyone at this point is convinced that the brilliant friend of the title is Lila and not Elena. "«Grazie, ma a un certo punto le scuole finiscono». «Non per te: tu sei la mia amica geniale, devi diventare la più brava di tutti, maschi e femmine»" (AG 308-309). "'Thanks, but at a certain point school is over.' 'Not for you: you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls.'" (MBF 312).[8] In this groundbreaking scene, by entrusting Elena with the title of "amica geniale," Lila has decided her future, granting her friend a life of study and success. Lila would have wanted to have all that Elena eventually gets, but, because she cannot, she decides to abide by the rules that her social environs dictate and at least find some satisfaction in seeing her friend's burgeoning humanistic (and, eventually, literary) talent.[9]

The second occurrence of the syntagm is an explicatory repetition of this scene in the last book of the series, where Elena admits that, ultimately, she is what Raffaella Cerullo has defined, more than once, "l'amica geniale" (SBP 438) "the brilliant friend" (SLC 459-460.) At this stage in the novel, Elena and Raffaella are in their sixties and live, respectively, in Turin and Naples, only sporadically calling each other on the phone. Yet Elena is having a great crisis of self-esteem and she has the suspicion that Lila is instead writing the best book on Naples that has ever been written. In her obsessive refrain on her own incapability as a writer, Elena cannot help but think of Lila as the one who should have been writing and having success because, undoubtedly, she would have done it better. "Ero ciò che Lila stessa, ora per scherzo, ora sul serio, aveva spesso ripetuto: Elena Greco, l'amica geniale di Raffaella Cerullo. Da quel rovesciarsi improvviso delle sorti sarei uscita annientata" (SBP 438). "I was what Lila herself, sometimes joking, sometimes serious, had often repeated: Elena Greco, the brilliant friend of Raffaella Cerullo. From that unexpected reversal of destinies I would emerge annihilated" (SLC 459-460). Elena's annihilation as a writer thus resulted "Da quel rovesciarsi improvviso delle sorti." In the first titular scene of the series, Lila had invested Elena with the title of "amica geniale" and we now discover that Elena experienced that as an "unexpected reversal of destinies."

I would argue that precisely this exchange in fates is the essential meaning of the title and, contextually, of the relationship between the two friends throughout the series. My theory finds support in etymology; "geniale" and "genio" share in fact the same Latin root: *genius*. Ferrante's employment of the etymologically fraught concepts of *geniale* and *genio* works in her text as semantic and practical realizations of the Classical *genius*. *Genius* in Latin has precisely the meaning of reciprocity of destinies that Lila and Elena assign to it: everyone in ancient Rome in fact possessed his own *genius*. In the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Hornblower, Spawforth 630), *genius* is defined as:

> literally 'that which is just born.' The *genius*, for a long time understood as the deification of the power of generation (…), was defined by Dumèzil (…) following the criticisms of W.Otto (…) as 'the entirety of traits united in a begotten being'. It is a deified concept, its seat in the forehead (Serv. On *Aen.* 3. 607), and is not far from the notion of the self. The genius forms the 'double' of the male, and is both born and dies with him (Hor. *Epist.* 2.2. 183 ff.). At an unknown date the same idea was developed for the 'double' of a woman (the *iuno*). This divine being, distinct from its human 'double', was the object of a cult. (630)

The Oxford Classical Dictionary then analyzes the importance of the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* for Roman families, which was "honoured in each household, … particularly on the

occasion of marriage." Surprisingly, not only men and women had their doubling *genius* or *iuno*, but also divinities and places of cult had their own *genius*:

> The *genius* was not limited to individual humans. Divinities equally, at least ones with an official 'birth' or entry into the body of the communal cults, possessed a *genius* or a *iuno* (*genius:* first in 58 BC, …) By extension every locality and establishment where the Romans exercised an activity had a *genius* which expressed the totality of its traits at the moment of constitution (e.g. *genius Romae*, …) (630)

According to Roman religion, the *genius* (or *iuno*) can refer to a person, a divinity, or a place. In my analysis on the relation between this Classical concept and Ferrante's use of the etymological meaning of *genio*, I am going to employ all of these different senses of the word. The concept of the *genius* as the "double" of the self, deified in Roman religion seems to be operating, throughout the series, in the character of Elena's best (and genius) friend: Lila.[10]

The "geniale" of the original title derives from the Latin *genialis*. In the first titular scene of the novel, Ferrante resuscitates the etymological meaning of this word. As the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* points out, *genius* literally means "that which is just born" and is thus strictly connected to the concept of generation. *Genialis* is the adjective derived from the noun *genius* and the most attested instances of the word in Latin literature are also referencing its generative nature. The expressions *lectus* or *torus genialis*, meaning "bridal bed," are in fact the most common ones for the word *genialis*. Importantly, the seminal dialogue where *geniale* is employed in the *Novels* is in fact taking place on Lila's bed, a few hours before her marriage takes place. The idea of generation could certainly be in the frame here, not just because of the setting of the scene on a bed, but also because Lila, as newlywed, will be on a *lectus genialis* very soon. Secondly, the bed is not just at the center of the scene on a practical and conceptual sense, but also, through the narrator's voice, it becomes etymologically evoked in Elena's mental refrain on Lila's loss of virginity. The scene is very much Classical in taste: Elena is helping Lila in the preparation for the wedding—both physically and psychologically—helping her bathe, comb her hair and put on the wedding gown:

> Non l'avevo mai vista nuda, mi vergognai. Oggi posso dire che fu la vergogna di poggiare con piacere lo sguardo sul suo corpo, di essere la testimone coinvolta della sua bellezza di sedicenne poche ore prima che Stefano la toccasse, la penetrasse, la deformasse, forse, ingravidandola. Allora fu solo una tumultuosa sensazione di sconvenienza necessaria, una condizione in cui non si può girare lo sguardo dall'altra parte, non si può allontanare la mano senza riconoscere il proprio turbamento, senza dichiararlo proprio ritraendosi, senza quindi entrare in conflitto con l'imperturbata innocenza di chi ti sta turbando, senza esprimere

> proprio col rifiuto la violenta emozione che ti sconvolge, sicché ti obblighi a restare, a lasciarle lo sguardo sulle spalle di ragazzo, sui seni coi capezzoli intirizziti, sui fianchi stretti e le natiche tese, sul sesso nerissimo, sulle gambe lunghe, sulle ginocchia tenere, sulle caviglie ondulate, sui piedi eleganti; e fai come se nulla fosse, quando invece tutto è in atto, presente, lì nella stanza povera e un po' buia, intorno il mobilio miserabile, su un pavimento sconnesso chiazzato d'acqua, e ti agita il cuore, ti infiamma le vene. (AG 309)

> I had never seen her naked, I was embarrassed. Today I can say that it was the embarrassment of gazing with pleasure at her body, of being the not impartial witness of her sixteen-year-old's beauty a few hours before Stefano touched her, penetrated her, disfigured her, perhaps, by making her pregnant. At the time it was just a tumultuous sensation of necessary awkwardness, a state in which you cannot avert the gaze or take away the hand without recognizing your own turmoil, without, by that retreat, declaring it, hence without coming into conflict with the undisturbed innocence of the one who is the cause of the turmoil, without expressing by that rejection the violent emotion that overwhelms you, so that it forces you to stay, to rest your gaze on the childish shoulders, on the breasts and stiffly cold nipples, on the narrow hips and the tense buttocks, on the black sex, on the long legs, on the tender knees, on the curved ankles, on the elegant feet; and to act as if it's nothing, when instead everything is there, present, in the poor dim room, amid the worn furniture, on the uneven, water-stained floor, and your heart is agitated, your veins inflamed. (MBF 312-313)

All of these actions are, however, accompanied by Elena's mental rumination on her friend's imminent destiny, in a lyrical outburst akin to Sappho's poetry. In her article "Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città: *L'Amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante tra continuità e cambiamento," Laura Benedetti has recognized the possible Sapphic undertone of the scene:

> …l'imminenza del distacco ispira una sorta di commosso epitalamio nel cui confuso convergere di vergogna e desiderio risuonano echi del lamento geloso di Saffo… Non si tratta, però, di una rivelazione dei veri sentimenti di Elena, quanto piuttosto di una sua più piena comprensione, facilitata dallo iato temporale ("Oggi posso dire") della complessità di un'amicizia che ha segnato la sua vita. (184)

> … the imminence of detachment inspires a sort of touching epithalamium, in which the confused convergence of shame and desire resounds with echoes of Sappho's jealous complaint. This is not, however, a revelation of the true sentiments of Elena, but rather her fuller understanding, facilitated by a temporal hiatus ("Today I can say") of the complexity of a friendship which has marked her life.

Elena's thoughts on Lila's corporeity and on her sexuality verge on sapphic desire, although they could be also justly interpreted as Elena's overly attached commentary on Lila's imminent defloration and coming of age.[11] Ferrante plays with notions of Classical sexuality in this scene, defying contemporary reservations about sexuality and choosing to employ, for this reason, a Sapphic, lyrical tone.[12]

After preparing Lila for her wedding, Elena can only find momentary peace of mind by imagining her own boyfriend sleeping with her. Imitation and mirroring are, again, a central feature of Elena's perception of her relationship with Lila. All of this, I argue, is reinforced by Lila's evocation of the concept of *geniale*.

In the "*geniale* scene," as elsewhere in the novel, Ferrante shrewdly foregrounds a narrative effect that enhances the idea of reciprocity that we attach to Elena and Lila's friendship.[13] Our viewpoint always coincides with Elena's perspective, but in this scene we read, for the first time in the novel, Lila's opinion of Elena.[14] The narrative modes are those of non-omniscience and homodiegesis; but Ferrante also constructs the plot so that Lila's character constantly threatens to take over both the subject and the style of the novels.[15]

Genialis

The story exists at all because of Lila's disappearance and the narrator's desire to find her or, in some way, reconstruct who she was. The narration offers multiple metaliterary instances, for example, when Elena reads "The Blue Fairy" (the story Lila wrote as a child) or, later, when she reads Lila's diaries. In both scenes, Elena is afraid of losing her own authorial voice, because of the literary strength and influential power that her friend's voice possesses. Indeed, as Rebecca Falkoff has shown, Ferrante drew heavily on Christa Wolf's *Quest for Christa T.*, when writing the *Neapolitan Novels* ("To Translate is to Betray").[16] In this novel, a very similar friendship is described between the narrator (Christa) and her disappeared, genius friend Christa T.[17] An assessment of Ferrante's classical sources lends further complexity to the doubling and reciprocal mirroring of two women friends, who maintain a mutual relationship not only in life, but also in writing.[18] My interpretation of Lila as the real *genius* and, in Italian, *genio* of the story, is a result, admittedly, of Ferrante's own stylistic virtuosity.

From the earliest stages of their lives, Elena and Lila are seen mirroring each other in their actions. Moreover, as has been noted, this is not only true on the agential level, but on the onomastic one too (Russo Bullaro). Their nicknames are almost the same: Lenù (Elena) and Lina (Raffaella), as everyone calls her, or Lila, Elena's unique way of naming her. Hence we are here witnessing a potential "doubling" of names and identities.

Another interesting parallel to the Roman *genii*, is that, just like them, Elena and Lila were born at roughly the same time, in August 1944.[19]

The Oxford Classical Dictionary defines *genius* as the double of the man, which, importantly, is "both born and dies with him…" (Hornblower and Spawforth 630) Ferrante herself confirms this sense of reciprocity implicit in the classical term "geniale." In *Frantumaglia* the author states, in fact:

> [Ma] nella relazione tra Elena e Lila accade che Elena, la subalterna, ricavi proprio dalla sua subalternità una sorta di brillantezza che disorienta, che abbaglia Lila. È un movimento difficile da raccontare, ma mi ha interessata per questo. Diciamo così: i moltissimi fatti della vita di Lila ed Elena mostreranno come l'una tragga forza dall'altra. Ma attenzione, non solo nel senso di aiutarsi, ma anche nel senso di saccheggiarsi, rubarsi sentimento e intelligenza, levarsi reciprocamente energia. (LF 225)
>
> But in the relationship between Elena and Lila, Elena, the subordinate, gets from her subordination a sort of brilliance that disorients, that dazzles Lila. It's a movement that's hard to describe, but for that reason it interested me. Let me put it like this: the many events in the lives of Lila and Elena will show how one draws strength from the other. But beware: not only in the sense that they help each other but also in the sense that they ransack each other, stealing feeling and intelligence, depriving each other of energy. (F 233)

While one would think that Lila is the dominating figure in their friendship, Elena can always resurface and even disorient her friend, drawing some of her genius from her. According to Ferrante, this mechanism works in a bilateral way.[20]

In her analysis of the words "genio" and "geniale" in Neapolitan, Daniela Brogi points out something similar. Her interpretation is based on the semantic sphere of the Classical *genius* of the two friends. Brogi references both a Neapolitan expression and an Italian one, that features the word "genio," (my italics):

> In più, l'espressione "geniale" a Napoli ha una pienezza semantica tutta sua: rimanda subito anche al modo di dire "non tenere genio", per intendere: non avere la voglia, l'istinto profondo. L'amica geniale, dentro questo sistema semantico, diventa anche l'amica più affine, più prossima a quello da cui siamo stati generati (*genio deriva dal latino "gignere": creare*). Le due amiche sono attaccate l'una all'altra da un destino di reciprocità, anche in senso tecnico (la storia di Lina sta dentro il racconto di Elena); sono il riferimento più a genio l'una

> dell'altra anche nel senso dell'attitudine morbosa a superare i rispettivi sensi di inadeguatezza, a trovare un varco dentro un mondo maschile che le vuole subalterne, compiendo la mossa più paradossale ma più comune, cioè stabilendo una competizione, una rivalità con chi è più simile: l'altra, l'amica, l'amica geniale, per l'appunto.[21]
>
> Furthermore, in Naples, the expression "genius" has its own semantic meaning. It goes back to the saying "non tenere genio," meaning not wanting to do something, and not having a profound inclination for it. Within this semantic system, the genius friend also becomes the friend most like us, the closest to that from which we are generated (in fact, "genius" comes from the Latin term "gignere," to create). The two friends are attached to one another by a fate of reciprocity, also in a technical sense (Lina's story lies within Elena's tale); each is the most congenial (in Italian, "a genio") reference to the other, also in the sense of their obsessive attitude to overcome their respective senses of inadequacy, to find their place in a man's world, which would like them to be subordinate, carrying out the most paradoxical, and yet the most common move, namely establishing a competition, a rivalry about who is the most similar: the other, the friend, the genius friend, indeed. (my trans.)

This rich definition of "genio" has several important implications. Brogi traces the notion back to its Classical etymology and underscores, in this context, the importance of the original meaning of the word. Interestingly, too, she has us consider the evolution of the word, which became absorbed, over time, into colloquial expressions, both in Neapolitan and in Italian.

That said, we might turn to the textual passages in the novels where the Italian word *genio* is employed. An example of the linguistic use of the Neapolitan expression is contained in the praise that the Mafioso Michele Solara sings of Lila in the third book of the novels, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. Importantly, we here have two occurrences of the word *genio*, out of the three that are in this book and the four that are in the whole series. In this scene, Michele Solara (who is in love with Lila) has just looked at Elena and noted that she is very smart and that the neighbors are proud of her, because she became a famous writer. Lila, however, is something else. She has some kind of force that no one comprehends. Michele recognizes this creative genius and knows that Elena benefited from it too; by creating a career nurtured by Lila's support:

> Lina ha una cosa viva nella testa che non ha nessuno, una cosa forte, che salta di qua e di là e niente riesce a fermarla, una cosa che nemmeno i medici sanno vedere e che secondo me non conosce nemmeno lei anche se ce l'ha dalla nascita – non la conosce e non la vuole riconoscere, guardate che faccia cattiva sta facendo in questo momento –, una cosa che se lei non sta di genio può causare

> molti problemi a chiunque, ma se sta di genio lascia tutti a bocca aperta. (SFR 304)
>
> Lina has something alive in her mind that no one else has, something strong, that jumps here and there and nothing can stop it, a thing that not even the doctors can see and that I think not even she knows, even though it's been there since she was born—she doesn't know it and doesn't want to recognize it, look what a mean face she's making right now– a thing that, if it doesn't like you can cause you a lot of problems but, if it does, leaves everyone astonished. (TLTS 334)

Ferrante here manages to link dialect to its Classical roots, instantiating in her text what Brogi noted in her linguistic analysis. Michele speaks to a mysterious, living thing that exists in Lila's mind and is unknown and indefinable, which he links to Lila's inclination, to her "genio." This quicksilver thing that moves around Lila's mind and determines her success is precisely the Classical *genius*. Lila, in Michele's words, has had this since she was born; tying "genio" back to the *genius* and to its intrinsic generative power. It is something that, although unacknowledged and probably unwanted by Lila, is going to mark Elena's life and writing, because it is shared with her through the creative process of writing.

Elena herself employs the word, in the last book of the series, to describe Lila's creative genius as a child, when she wrote "The Blue Fairy." This short story was Lila's first literary creation, something we are never privy to in the text, but referenced again and again by Elena as the matrix for all of her literary endeavors:

> Se il genio che Lila aveva espresso da bambina con la *Fata blu*, turbando la maestra Oliviero, adesso, in vecchiaia, sta manifestando tutta la sua potenza? In quel caso il suo libro sarebbe diventato – anche solo per me – la prova del mio fallimento e leggendolo avrei capito come avrei dovuto scrivere ma non ero stata capace. (SBP 437)
>
> If the *genius* that Lila had expressed as a child in "The Blue Fairy," disturbing Maestra Oliviero, is now, in old age, manifesting all its power? In that case her book would become—even only for me—the proof of my failure, and reading it I would understand how I should have written but had been unable to. (SLC 459)

In sum, the word "genio" and "geniale" are only employed by or used to refer to Lila, filtered by Elena's opinion that her fate was exchanged with that of Lila, the actual "genius friend." The connection and reciprocity in the fate the girls share is based, for Elena, on Lila's creative genius. This opens up yet another layer of meanings which are connected, once again, to Lila; through her artistic and literary creations, she inspires,

goads and influences Elena, creating a connection founded on the shared experiences of learning and writing. This connection, we will discover, is for life, just like the Roman *genius* was. These metaliterary allusions of the text are fused with the narrative technique that I have underlined: Lila threatens to take over authorship of Elena's text not only through her superior genius, but most of all, through her writing. Her texts, however, are never present on the page; they are never quoted, but only alluded to and described by Elena. "The Blue Fairy," the letters that Lila writes to Elena, and Lila's diaries: all add up to Lila's literary corpus, which eventually will stand in for her disappeared body at the end of the story.[22] We can thus understand why the absence of the corpus that generated all of Elena's writing eventually finds its parallel in the disappearance of Lila's body.

Not only are these writings absent in the text, they are literally destroyed in the course of the plot. Elena will in fact throw into the Arno Lila's diaries at the beginning of *The Story of a New Name*. "The Blue Fairy" also undergoes a tragic destiny when Lila, in her twenties, already a worker in the Soccavo factory, sets the little booklet that Elena brought her back from the past on fire. It seems like the only possible end of Lila's works (and of her own self, as it is,) is to be destroyed by either Elena or herself and to disappear completely. This same absence nonetheless generates the whole of Elena's literary corpus, from plot to style, to inspiration.

Initially the two little friends want to write a novel together, but because Elena has to prepare for the admission exam for middle school with maestra Oliviero, Lila undertakes the writing on her own. Lila's inability to go on to middle school, a negative thing in itself, gives her the free time to write "La Fata blu." "La Fata blu" is with all probability Lila's literary adaptation of the infamous character of the "fata turchina" from *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (Collodi).[23] When Elena reads "La fata blu" as a child, she recognizes Lila's literary talent and knows that their dream of getting rich through the writing of a novel, just as the author of *Little Women* did, is something that Lila is going to achieve alone. Then Elena feels compelled to show Maestra Oliviero Lila's achievement and the teacher's feedback is very obscure: she tells Elena that Lila belongs to the plebeian class (AG 67, MBF 71-72). In *The Story of a New Name*, Elena, just a few days before her first novel gets published, comes back to Naples and incidentally comes across Lila's "La fata blu." So, she discovers that maestra Oliviero had actually appreciated the story very much and, as an adult, she understands that the teacher's aversion to Lila at the time was probably due to her parents' decision not to pay for Lila's future education. Repeatedly, the whole story of the writing of Elena's book pivots around the two girls' differences in educational upbringing; Elena in fact asks herself what it is that made the teacher fight for her own education and not for Lila's. Lila's genius deserved a better mentor. This scene also tragically reminds us that Lila, in the titular scene, expresses her desire that her best friend go on studying, always, and that

she has to be the best of all, boys and girls. And so again Elena is left to feel a complex sense of guilt towards her more talented friend. Later, when she is about to become an author, Elena feels like a fraud: her genius friend should have been in her place:

> Mi misi a leggere "La fata blu" dall'inizio, correndo per l'inchiostro pallido, per la grafia così simile alla mia di allora. Ma già alla prima pagina cominciai a sentire male allo stomaco e presto mi coprii di sudore. Solo alla fine, però, ammisi ciò che avevo capito già dopo poche righe. Le paginette infantili di Lila erano il cuore segreto del mio libro. Chi avesse voluto sapere cosa gli dava calore e da dove nasceva il filo robusto ma invisibile che saldava le frasi, avrebbe dovuto rifarsi a quel fascicolo di bambina, dieci paginette di quaderno, lo spillo arrugginito, la copertina colorata in modo vivace, il titolo, e nemmeno la firma. (SNC 453)

> I began to read "The Blue Fairy" from the beginning, racing over the pale ink, the handwriting so similar to mine of that time. But already at the first page I began to feel sick to my stomach and soon I was covered with sweat. Only at the end, however, did I admit what I had understood after a few lines. Lila's childish pages were the secret heart of my book. Anyone who wanted to know what gave it warmth and what the origin was of the strong but invisible thread that joined the sentences would have had to go back to that child's packet, ten notebook pages, the rusty pin, the brightly colored cover, the title, and not even a signature. (SNN 455)

The girls' similar handwriting and the absence of a signature bring back the issue of authorship; and the reader is left to doubt whether Elena co-authored the children's story or Lila wrote it alone. Regardless, Elena here wishes she had written it herself. Once more, in this passage Ferrante foregrounds her narrative stratagem: the reciprocal movement of the lives and literary endeavors of the two girls is so entangled, that we feel as though the two girls could be one. The crux is that when Lila conceived of "La fata blu," she was drawing from a shared imagination with Elena, where their children's fantasies were continuous. The morning after finding "La fata blu," Elena wants to reach Lila in San Giovanni a Teduccio and give her back her story. In her emotional rumination, she finds that she and Lila are "connected." They are, in the text "one in two, two in one:"

> Ma soprattutto sentivo la necessità di farla sedere accanto a me, dirle: vedi come siamo state affiatate, *una in due, due in una*, e provarle con il rigore che mi pareva di aver appreso in Normale, con l'accanimento filologico che avevo imparato da Pietro, come il suo libro di bambina avesse messo radici profonde nella mia testa fino a sviluppare nel corso degli anni un altro libro, differente, adulto, mio, e tuttavia imprescindibile dal suo, dalle fantasie che avevamo elaborato insieme

> nel cortile dei nostri giochi, lei e io in continuità, formate, sformate, riformate. (SNC 454)

> But most of all I felt the need to have her sit beside me, to tell her, you see how connected we are, *one in two, two in one*, and prove to her with the rigor that it seemed to me I had learned in the Normale, with the philological persistence I had learned from Pietro, how her child's book had put down deep roots in my mind and had, in the course of the years, produced another book, different, adult, mine, and yet inseparable from hers, from the fantasies that we had elaborated together in the courtyard of our games, she and I continuously formed, deformed, reformed. (SNN 455)

In Elena's words the two girls were one as children; close-knit, harmonious. As I have been arguing, this relationship can only be fully appreciated through the concept of *genius*; Lila is almost inseparable from Elena, in terms of their generation and of their generative, creative powers. Elena further complicates this connection through the employment of a philological analysis of her own texts, in order to retrace the influence of Lila's seminal short story: "La fata blu." First, this could arguably be an historical reference to the concept of allusion, developed in the fifties by classical Philology professor Giorgio Pasquali at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa. The "rigor" and "philological persistence" which lead Elena to her formulation of literary allusion could, in fact, come from this perspective. In his essay "Arte allusiva," Pasquali explains his understanding of allusion in Greek, Latin, Italian poetry and even in the figurative arts. For the author, there is a distinction to be made between reminiscences and allusions, which can in their turn be evocations or citations:

> … in poesia culta, dotta io ricerco quelle che da qualche anno in qua non chiamo più reminiscenze ma allusioni, e volentieri direi evocazioni e in certi casi citazioni. Le reminescenze possono essere inconsapevoli; le imitazioni, il poeta può desiderare che sfuggano al pubblico; le allusioni non producono l'effetto voluto se non su un lettore che si ricordi chiaramente del testo cui si riferiscono. Questo procedimento è anche moderno. (Pasquali 11)

While Elena does not speak of poetry in the passage above, she is nonetheless formulating this same concept for her prose and for the retracing of Lila's story in her own writing. As Pasquali would say, she is not and she has never been searching for the sources of a poem (11).[24] Rather, she is auto-analyzing her prose, observing that Lila's influence on her literary creations is ineluctable, because the two girls have shared so much of their minds during their childhood. While Elena's reminiscences of Lila's work are unconscious, the resurfacing of them at a conscious level enables her to uncover her allusions to Lila; Pasquali would call this "allusive art." This could also support Falkoff's theory of Wolf's influence on Ferrante. While actually referencing what has happened in

reality between Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Christa Wolf's *Quest for Christa T.,* Elena Greco is arguably describing in the novel what happened between her text and Raffaella Cerullo's "The Blue Fairy."[25]

In *The Story of a New Name*, when Elena is taking her final exam, a mysterious woman with blue hair appears and, praising her, she advises Elena to apply to the Scuola Normale Superiore. This skinny woman, with her pink suit and her freshly died turquoise hair is going to be Elena's "fata turchina." Elena never even learns the woman's name and sees her only once in her life, but she owes a great deal to her. As she says later: "Non l'ho mai più incontrata, non so nemmeno come si chiamasse, eppure le devo moltissimo" (SNC 324). "I never met her again, I don't even know her name, and yet I owe her a great deal" (SNN 324). This character is arguably an instantiation, in real life, of Lila's fictional "fata blu." This woman gives Elena a way out of her small-town life and the possibility to apply for and eventually enter the Scuola Normale.[26] In the text, although Elena is the homodiegetic narrator who writes (of) Lila, it is ultimately Lila who writes Elena's destiny. This push-pull movement between the lives and the minds of the two women can be explained through the Classical concept of *genius* in their shared, twentieth century existences. Lila's wish that Elena vicariously go on studying in her life and achieve success through this commitment results first in her text and later, in an almost magical way, in Elena's narration.

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[1] Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, thereby indicated as AG; the English version (*My Brilliant Friend*), translated by Ann Goldstein, is indicated as MBF. The remaining three novels as well as a book of reflections on writing will also be indicated by the first letters of their title words: SNC *Storia del nuovo cognome*, (English SNN), SFR *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, (English TLTS) and SBP *Storia della bambina perduta* (English SLC), LF *La Frantumaglia* (English F).

[2] The English translation points to the place where the novels' fiction takes place. For the most part in fact, the novels are set in Naples.

[3] See Caracciolo. For a reception history of classical Naples at large, see Hughes and Buongiovanni.

[4] For the German concept of "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung,*" see Lucamante 86.

[5] Tiziana de Rogatis, Kathryn Wehling-Giorgi and Stiliana Milkova have already noted that Greek mythology belongs to Elena Ferrante's poetics. All of her female protagonists can in fact be seen as embodying classical heroines and enacting archaic rites of passage. *Troubling Love* rewrites the myth of Demeter and Persephone, *The Days of Abandonment* that of Medea, *The Lost Daughter* hints to the myth of Leda and the Swan. As Christa Wolf then, Ferrante is deeply engaged in the modern rewriting of classical myths.

[6] In English not quite "Helen the Greek," but "Helen Greek" (masculine). The protagonist's name also shows the author's interest that the Classics be an agential part of the story.

[7] "Parla dell'*Odissea*?" (*SNC* 380). "Is it about the *Odyssey*?" asks maestra Oliviero to an adult Lila (*SNN* 380.)

[8] The English translation of "geniale" with "brilliant," while accurate on the level of meaning, fails on the etymological and semantic one. On the "geniale scene," see also Ghezzo and Teardo, especially 183.

[9] Almost at the end of the novel, Elena explains her way of seeing Lila's attitude towards her: "C'entriamo sempre e soltanto noi due: lei che vuole che io dia ciò che la sua natura e le circostanze le hanno impedito di dare, io che non riesco a dare ciò che lei pretende; lei che si arrabbia per la mia insufficienza e per ripicca vuole ridurmi a niente come ha fatto con se stessa, io che ho scritto mesi e mesi e mesi per darle una forma che non si smargini, e batterla, e calmarla, e così a mia volta calmarmi" (SBP 444). "It's only and always the two of us who are involved: she who wants me to give what her nature and circumstances kept her from giving, I who can't give what she demands; she who gets angry at my inadequacy and out of spite wants to reduce me to nothing, as she has done with herself, I who have written for months and months and months to give her a form whose boundaries won't dissolve, and defeat her, and calm her, and so in turn calm myself" (SLC 466).

[10] In my opinion Lila is not only Elena's *genius* (or *iuno*), but she is also symbolizing the *genius loci* of Naples.

[11] On questions of feminine corporeality and feminine gaze as sites of resistance, see Wehling-Giorgi.

[12] The situation is similar to the one described in Sappho's fragment 31 V, where the poet is assisting to her beloved's new male partner looking at her and is jealously recognizing a rival in him. This gives life to the lyrical swaying of the corporeal that happens in Sappho and, contextually, in Ferrante. For this, see Sappho as qtd. in Benedetti, 184 n. 20: "'Mi sembra pari agli dei quell'uomo che siede di fronte a te e vicino ascolta te che dolcemente parli e ridi di un riso che suscita desiderio. Questa visione veramente mi ha turbato il cuore nel petto: appena ti guardo un breve istante, nulla mi è più possibile dire, ma la lingua mi si spezza e subito un fuoco sottile mi corre sotto la pelle […]' (Saffo, 137)." "He seems very similar to the gods/ That man who sits in front of you/ And listens to you speaking/ And smiles softly;/ And suddenly my heart throbs./ When I glance at you,/ I can no longer speak,/ My tongue is broken and/ A subtle flame is creeping into my skin,/ My eyes can see nothing more,/ My ears are buzzing,/ Drops of sweat are oozing,/ My whole body is trembling./I become greener than grass/ And I feel as if I were dead/ But everything must be tolerated, because … a poor man…" English translation by Mariangela Labate.

[13] In the documentary *Ferrante Fever*, writer Jonathan Franzen gives an interesting peek inside his interpretation of Ferrante's narrative craft: "Elena Ferrante has split herself in two… she is Lila and she is Lenù, this is something I try to do as a writer, I split myself up, I take these contradictory parts of myself and I put them in conflicts by setting up these two poles; the demonic pole of Lila and the cautious, sensible Lenù. The way they orbit around each other and constantly courting each other brutally."

[14] As Franzen stated: "One of my favorite moments in any novel in the longest time… It's the moment when I cried for the first time reading these books, it's the moment when you get what the title means. It's when Lila says: 'you have to keep studying, you're my brilliant friend." I choked up just reading that. Because we've been so inside Lenù, we don't realize that… it hits us like it hits her: wow! You think I'm the brilliant one! It's so moving."

[15] For the linguistic menace that Lila constitutes in her preferred choice of Neapolitan over Italian, see Antonelli. I think that Antonelli's idea could represent, linguistically, what is posited literarily in the *Novels*: that the authorial voice of Elena (Italian) is constantly threatened by Lila's voice (Neapolitan.) As Giulia Zagrebelski points out in *Ferrante Fever*: "C'è sempre una che ha più potere sull'altra." "One (of them) is always prevailing over the other."

[16] On this, also see Donadio. Surprisingly enough, Donadio does not cite Falkoff's article.

[17] Falkoff's hypothesis that Raja could also be elaborating, in her novels, on her own friendship with the writer Christa Wolf is also a wonderful assessment on the mimetic role of literature in life.

[18] The interpretation of Lila as a figure for both the author (especially for her *smarginatura*) and for her muse is also a paramount aspect of the novels. In *Ferrante Fever* Nicola Lagioia points out that "L'amica geniale è la musa della scrittrice." My transl. "The brilliant friend is the muse of the writer."

[19] Ferrante has probably picked this date intentionally. In August 1944 Italy was still undergoing the bloody Civil War and the Allied forces at that point had just reached the Gothic Line. Moreover, March 1944 is the date Vesuvius erupted in Naples and this detail could link the date the two protagonists were born with their later experience of Vesuvius erupting in 1979. For a first-hand account of the war-torn city and of the eruption, see Lewis.

[20] The epigraph to the *Novels*, an excerpt from Goethe's *Faust* refers to Mephistopheles; the spirit that has to play the part of the devil, goading and inspiring Faust in both a positive and negative way, just like Lila will do with Elena in the books. The "movement" that Ferrante describes in *La Frantumaglia* is comparable to the relationship between Faust and the devil. My assessment of the Classical concept of *genius*/*genialis* pertaining to the girls' friendship finds here a Christian equivalent. See Barchiesi 65 ff. On the demon, see also Corrigan.

[21] Brogi. In *Ferrante Fever,* Nicola Lagioia also points out that "Amore e competizione vanno di pari passo fra Elena e Lila e però al tempo stesso le due sembrano legate quasi psichicamente, telepaticamente le une alle altre." "Love and competition go hand in hand for Elena and Lila, yet, at the same time, the two seem to have a quasi-psychic or a telepathic tie to one another."

[22] The expression "literary corpus" comes from the Latin *corpus*: body.

[23] Collodi put in text Italy's most famous and acclaimed children's book, *Pinocchio*, which traces the bildungsroman of a puppet who undergoes many adventures. The "fata turchina," or "fairy with turquoise hair" is Pinocchio's life savior in more than one instance, and certainly the most positive character of the novel. The book is so famous in popular Italian culture, that language has a proverbial understanding of the "fata turchina" as someone who can magically get you out of trouble. Ferrante here shows a feminine take on an otherwise exclusively masculine story.

[24] "Io non cerco, io non ho mai cercato le fonti di una poesia." ("I am not looking, I have never looked for the sources of a poem;" my trans.; 11)

[25] See Falkoff. The author shows that Ferrante's relationship to Christa Wolf, as a translator, has probably inspired the literary friendship of Elena and Lila. In other words, Elena Greco is here voicing Elena Ferrante's thoughts on the influence that the work of translating Christa Wolf's work might have had on her own tetralogy.

[26] This idea is already in De Rogatis: "la fata blu si tramuta nell'anonima e generosa professoressa dai capelli turchini che dischiude a Elena le porte della Normale" (63), but I have a different interpretation of the passage. For De Rogatis, this is a sign of the "progressiva smarginatura del patto magico dell'infanzia." My focus is instead on Lila's writing of the story as a sign of her agency on Elena's life and as confirmation of her essence of *genius*.

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