

Giovanni Tiso

Badly written men

The line comes from a *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *The Story of the Lost Child*, the fourth and last chapter of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan cycle. With but one exception the men in the story, opines reviewer Mark Twefik, 'are all needy losers whose recourse to action is either pleading, infidelity or violence.' He concludes: 'How much better would these books be if Ferrante had paid more than lip-service to the men.'

I wouldn't be the first person to observe that this statement completely misses the point of Ferrante's work. It misses in fact several points. Yes, Elena and Lila, the protagonists, are 'full of life and complexity', as Twefik puts it, while the portrayal of the men who surround them is a function of the respective roles in the lives of the two women. But that's what being a protagonist, or 'chief actor', means. You could say the same of the other women in the books, some of whom play at various times the role of antagonists.

The four novels have a first-person narrator, Elena, and another character so central at times as to almost become a first person herself, Lila. Being the story of two women whose main preoccupation, from a very young age, is to govern their own lives—a fact which would be unremarkable in a male-driven story—this first-personhood becomes not just a narratological but a thematic fact as well. Suppose Ferrante had chosen to have the books narrated by a third-person omniscient voice. Would we be tempted to assign it a gender, because of the gender of the writer or of the protagonists? And would this shift affect our desire, as readers, to spend some time in the company of the other characters, both male and female?

These questions aren't very interesting, not for us. They might have been at times during the historical time spanned by the novels, as testified by the prurient reception of Elena's own autobiographical

book, written and published in the early to mid-60s, or by Lila and Elena's childhood interest in *Little Women* and its overt moral lessons, or by the content of Elena's second book, a narrative reflection on the concept of womanhood as invented by men, from the Christian creation myth onwards. However, in contemporary Italy—the Italy in which the fictional Elena writes the cycle, firmly in the past tense, as a woman in her mid to late sixties—that the story of two women should be written, from childhood to adulthood, is unremarkable, and need not be justified.

Mr Twefik's complaint that Ferrante pays lip service to her men in this respect is a sign of the residual confusion or discomfort that undoubtedly exist, but not a criticism that should be taken seriously. I find the second part of his equation far more interesting. The men in these novels are pathetic, violent, cheating losers, he grumbles. What are we to make of it?

In the picture, my mother's best friend is posing rigidly, in a mock-military stance. She is standing in front of an apple orchard but for some reason she is dressed like a sailor. I doubt she would have come close to seeing the sea at the age of 7 or 8, when the picture was taken. The year is scribbled on the back of the photograph in my mother's hand: 1939. I like to imagine that it was Mum who took it, although I doubt that she did.

I don't have any pictures of the two of them together, but at this age they were still inseparable, as they remained even after my mother graduated from primary school and enrolled at high school in a nearby town, where she commuted by bicycle every day. Not her friend, however. The other picture I carry of her in my head is actually a description of my mother's, of how some years later this lively young woman who smiles at me in the sailor's costume used to return from the fields during the rice-picking season so utterly exhausted that her face and eyes looked lifeless, or better devoid of intelligence, like an animal's: beastly labour made flesh.

My mother and her friend grew up in the South-Eastern corner of Lombardy, near the Po river, in the 'Little World' romanticised

by Giovanni Guareschi in his *Don Camillo* series, which was every bit as popular fifty years ago in the English-speaking world as Ferrante's Neapolitan novels are today. Now, however, I find myself more inclined to overlay the geographically and culturally distant story of Elena and Lila with theirs. Not just because of the superficial similarities—one girl stayed in school, the other didn't; one woman got to leave her hometown, the other didn't—but because of the social order in which they were born, and that Ferrante dissects so efficiently.

While in the small rural village in the North of Italy it expressed itself in a different vernacular and through different gestures than in the big Southern city, this order was equally entrenched and archaic. My mother sometimes joked that she was born in the Middle Ages, but it wasn't really a joke in the land where farm labourers had to barter days of work for the privilege of spending the coldest winter evenings in the barn to partake of the heat emanating from the master's cows.

This order was also deeply patriarchal. My mother knew that none of the boys from land-owning families who asked her out would ever marry her; one of them talked about the land-owning girl he had set his sights on even while courting Mum. There was no need to dissimulate the fact that only the poor married for love, just as everyone knew that sex before marriage—or instead of marriage—sometimes had consequences for the women, but never for the men.

My grandfather was something of an exception: he got his girlfriend pregnant at the age of 16 and went on to marry her, even though she came from a farm labouring family and had been orphaned of her mother, while he owned no land but came from a family of tailors, which created something of a social gap. In other respects, however, he was a man of his time. He was a Fascist, like most of his contemporaries. He beat his son, like most fathers.

Meanwhile, it was from the men of their own generation that my mother and her friend had to guard against. Educated women were not prized as potential wives in a farming community, which would have helped Mum as she negotiated her way out of the Little World.

Her friend, who had no such prospects, got pregnant. Her story is not mine to tell, but it is not very long and it does not end well.

I do not know who these men were, except they were clearly not the noble, laconic heroes of Guareschi's stories, just as Ferrante's men aren't the exuberant, life-loving imps of stock Neapolitan comedy. The patriarchal culture over which they presided, of which they were the agents and foot soldiers, wrote them badly. Were it they had been more complex, more nuanced. Were it they aspired to a qualitatively different life, not just for themselves but also for their wives and daughters. And oh, how much easier and happier would life have been, for my mother but especially her friend, if their recourse to action had been anything other than pleading, infidelity and violence.

I have always asked myself where my mother—who grew up during Fascism with few books and only the state radio to report on national affairs—can possibly have found the strength and the intellectual models to imagine a different life for herself, even before she took the concrete steps that turned that project into a reality. Ferrante's novels dramatise a conflict that no doubt she had to go through but that I never witnessed. By the time she had me, at the then quite late age of 40, she was a first person, in full control of her life to the extent that anyone could be, and was at peace with the world she had left behind but that we visited often.

Until the very end, that is, when she decided—or was forced by the circumstances—to go back, and spend what was to be the last year of her life in a rest home not far from the old village. Whatever social progress took place outside of those walls, it had not found its way inside, among her contemporaries, who still espoused those same values, and didn't see real worth in anything other than working the land and being part of the old order. She was back among the badly written men, although this time it was on her terms and anyway, to paraphrase Elena, her life by now had been lived, so it didn't matter.