



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

University of Melbourne

Jocelyn Richardson

Elena Ferrante's loud solitude: The benefits and limitations of relational anonymity

Abstract:

This article examines the ethics of novelist Elena Ferrante's anonymity through an analysis of her correspondences in *Frantumaglia* (2016). Prompted by Ferrante, I offer a critique of modern authorship and propose a relational understanding of creativity, an approach that emphasises the social uses of language and refutes the separation of the individual author from their social environment. I argue that Ferrante's writing praxis enacts Judith Butler's ethical methodology from *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) by withholding normative biographical details while providing readers with de-identified self-narration via her fiction and written correspondences. I argue that this methodology restores the primacy of language and the structure of address to the act of writing with the ancillary benefit of a conditional yet autonomous creative space in which to resist the pressure of normative morality – a space reconfigured as relational or “loud” solitude.

Biographical note:

Jocelyn Richardson is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. She has had poetry, short stories and non-fiction published in local and international journals.

Keywords:

Creative writing, relationality, Elena Ferrante, Judith Butler, subjectivity

Relationality theory

Before turning to Ferrante, I wish to briefly discuss relationality as a theoretical precedent for her descriptions of writing and creativity. I borrow an understanding of the term *relational* from the multidiscipline symposium held in 2015, titled “Relationality”, convened by Simone Drichel and hosted by the Postcolonial Studies Research Network at the University of Otago. In Drichel’s terms, relationality “asserts the primacy of relationships in the constitution of subjectivity” (2019a, p. 2). It posits that individuals, from birth to adulthood, are inescapably reliant on their relationships with others and that these relationships are fundamental to the formation of selfhood. This “self” does not pre-exist or exist outside of familial or social relationships – it is constituted by them. Drichel points to a long line of relational theories that have resisted “the Cartesian conception of discrete, self-founding subjects – so stubbornly persistent in the Western imagination” (2015). Her examples include critiques of Freud’s “original drive theory with its implicit focus on the individual ego”, naming Fairbairn, Guntrip and Winnicott (2015), as well as Judith Butler’s theories of subjectivity to which I will return (2019a, p. 2).

I also add Melanie Klein to this list, as her writing was “read passionately” by Ferrante (2016, p. 112). She was one of the first continental psychologists to break away from Freud’s unitary model of the libidinal ego and introduce a relational theory of subjectivity. Klein (1935) argues that the study of psychic development should focus on object relations, that is, the way individuals enact and assess their relationships with others, rather than Freudian drive gratification. Klein asserts that it is the ability to make realistic correlations between external and internal objects that leads towards either satisfactory or unsatisfactory relationships (1935, pp. 150–151). Difficulty relating to others leads to depressive or anxious states, proving for Klein that these relations are constitutional in the notion of selfhood.

I draw attention to Klein’s work because her influence on Ferrante can be seen in the way Ferrante describes the intersubjective “I”. In her response to novelist Nicola Lagioia in *Frantumaglia* Ferrante states: “The idea that every ‘I’ is largely made up of others and by the other wasn’t theoretical; it was a reality” (2016, p. 355). This echoes Klein, who claims that “even the earliest incorporated objects form the basis of the super-ego and enter into its structure. The question is by no means a merely theoretical one” (1935, p. 151).

Ferrante’s attraction to a theory of irreducible, anti-normative subjectivity also finds precedent in Judith Butler’s work on the limits of self-narration, another theorist who, Ferrante says, pushed her “to reflect on the use of literature” (2016, p. 322). Butler (2004), similarly to Klein, argues that the first-person singular cannot exist outside of its relationships with others, therefore the subject must contain so-called objects. This “I” is unable to psychically exclude “you” or “them” because it relies on them to define itself. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler expresses this: “If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you” (p. 49). Butler’s argument is an extension of Klein’s: rather than using relationality as the basis for a study of psychological pathologies, she uses it to interrogate ethical potentiality and to argue for the ontological legibility of socially precarious subject-

positions. Relationality, for Butler, becomes the foundation of her ethics of precarity and opacity.

In *Bodies That Matter* (2011), Butler describes the use of the first person singular as “a citation of the place of the ‘I’ in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates” (p. 171). Butler’s use of the term “anonymity” here has further implications than a refusal to appear publicly: partial anonymity, for Butler, conditions *all* self-narration. This comes to the fore in examining Ferrante’s choice to withhold normative biographical information from the public, as Butler’s more radical definition of anonymity provides a useful concept for understanding how decentring authorship might be considered an ethical position. Therefore, Butler’s theory, drawn primarily from *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), will later inform my discussion of the ethics of anonymity.

The creativity paradox

Elena Ferrante, to introduce her briefly, is a widely renowned Italian-language novelist who has never appeared publicly or provided normative biographical information. Between 1991 and 2003, Ferrante’s readers could only encounter her through her early novels published in Italian and the written interviews she granted to Italian journalists. As interest in her identity grew, her Italian publishers collated her correspondences with critics and released the first edition of *Frantumaglia* in 2003. In the preface, her publishers say that this collection “should clarify, we hope conclusively, the writer’s motives for remaining outside the media circus and its demands, as she has for ten years” (Ferrante, 2016, p. 3). While Ferrante discusses her motives at length, what her publishers underestimated is the stamina and centrality of questions of authorship within literary discourse, especially given the global fame Ferrante was to encounter from 2012 onwards with the release of the Neapolitan quartet.

Frantumaglia was published again in 2016 with additional interviews from 2003 to 2015. It therefore charts Ferrante’s rise to fame and subtle shifts in the discourse around her anonymity and writing practice. One appeal of *Frantumaglia* for this study is the fact that it is epistolary and therefore structurally dialogical. This provides a useful push and pull between assumptions and corrections about the writer and her writing practice.

This paper is interested primarily in the ethical questions raised by two paradoxical statements made by Ferrante (2016) in *Frantumaglia*:

Perhaps the old myths about inspiration spoke at least one truth: when one makes a creative work, one is inhabited by others – in some measure becomes another (p. 49)

and:

Like anyone who writes, I work with events, feelings, emotions that belong to me very intimately. But over time the problem has changed. Today it’s important to me above

all to preserve the freedom to dig deeply, without self-censorship, into my stories. (p. 191)

Ferrante implies that, as a literary writer, she must become someone else, or a collective of others; at the same time, she must maintain a private space in which to excavate her own intimate history. To encapsulate this paradox, I use the term “loud solitude”, borrowed from Ferrante’s final interview in which Nicola Lagioia praises the interdependence of her characters in the Neapolitan quartet. She responds:

I’ve described women at moments when they are absolutely alone. But in their heads there is never silence or even focus. The most absolute solitude, at least in my experience, and not just as a narrator, is always, to paraphrase the title of a very good book by Hrabal, too loud. (Ferrante, 2016, p. 356)

In this description, the two requisites of her writing process – privacy and multivocality – are present. “Loud solitude” therefore presents a useful analogy and, when applied to the writing process, speaks to the creativity paradox identified above. It describes a state in which a solitary writer’s mind echoes with the voices of friends, family, strangers, media and literature, a model of subjectivity that is interconnected and socially contingent and which refutes the modern separation of the individual author from their social context. For a long time, it has bothered me that writerly solitude is often synonymous with loneliness and social isolation, as this fails to acknowledge writers’ reliance on personal relationships, literary precedents, readerships and the social uses of language. I am therefore interested in the habits that lead critics, and potentially authors, to consider writing to be a purely autonomous and individual practice, in contrast to a multivocal and relational one.

Modern subjectivity

Many of Ferrante’s convictions are revealed in the way she counters critics’ assumptions about her writing practice in *Frantumaglia*. Several interviewers imply that Ferrante might regret choosing anonymity, that it must have an isolating or negative effect on her life (2016, pp. 74–75, 168, 236, 229, 235). Ferrante always replies that she is either busy or timid, but never isolated. As early as 2003, she writes, “I have a life, both private and public, that is quite satisfying” (p. 74). In an interview from 2014, Rachel Donadio asks, “anonymous literary success must also be a bit lonely, no?” (p. 245). Ferrante replies, “I don’t feel at all lonely ... I have my life, which for now is quite full” (pp. 245–246). Simonetta Fiori asks more directly, “Is it onerous to have to dissemble?” to which Ferrante replies, “I don’t dissemble. I live my life, and those who are part of it know everything about me” (p. 236).

Ferrante’s replies continuously rebuke the implication that she writes in a space of social and psychic isolation, while conversely, many critics appear attached to the modern myth of the lone genius. I use the term *modern* to reveal the myth’s historicity and roots in Enlightenment and Western philosophy. This modern approach to creativity promotes the possibility of absolute creative autonomy in alignment with the Cartesian ideal of self-possession. Authors

in this context are considered masters of their texts, an image rooted in a patriarchal and metaphysical imaginary.

This imaginary is what critical theorist Mari Ruti sees as the “original target” of early post-structural criticism (2016, p. 8). Most often pointed to in literary contexts is Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1977), which critiques the process of individuating and venerating modern authors. Still relevant today and to the case study of Ferrante is Barthes’ critique of positivist habits in modern literary criticism:

the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; ... the explanation of a work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his “confidence”. (1977, p. 143)

Barthes highlights that fiction was believed to be a form of self-expression and this “self” could be isolated through access to a writer’s biography. This also cast writing as a form of confession or the revelation of a unique and discrete solitude. Ferrante evidently agrees with Barthes’ critique – her anonymity is intended to thwart positivist readings of her fiction as autobiographical. In *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante states this clearly: “The biographical path does not lead to the genius of a work” (2016, p. 169).

Critic Dayna Tortorici defends Ferrante’s privacy in the essay “Bluebeard” (2016), but characterises Ferrante’s case against biographical criticism as “far simpler and more conservative” (2016) than the original post-structuralists. It is clear that, while Ferrante is attracted to theories that deconstruct the “tyranny” of the author, her stance does not preclude her from engaging with the public through de-identified nonfiction or from supposing that readers of her fiction are imagining the existence of an individual author. She writes in *Frantumaglia*:

As I see it, extracting the personality of the writer from the story he offers, from the characters he puts onstage, from the landscapes, from the objects, from interviews like this – in short, from the tonality of his writing entirely – is simply a good way of reading. (Ferrante, 2016, p. 225)

Where she and the post-structuralists align, however, is in preventing the opposite from occurring: “the story” or “genius” of a work being extracted from the singularity of the author’s biography and self-autonomous imagination.

Alone in a crowd

The assumption that creativity is an individualistic pursuit begins to explain why Donadio thought Ferrante was lonely as a result of her anonymity. It is not necessarily wrong to assume. Ferrante says that it took her many years to fight against an “overestimation of literary writing”

(2016, p. 50) and the idea that writing had to be “all-absorbing” (p. 50). Continuing with a critique of the modern artist, Montuori and Purser in “Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth: Toward a Contextual View of Creativity” (1995) describe the compounding phenomena that explain why, over time, the modern author is compelled to isolate themselves from their social relationships:

The modern view of creativity has venerated the artist or genius as a cultural hero, because [they are] someone who has forged something new and original by struggling against and rising above the limiting, stultifying forces of the conforming masses. To maintain such a stance, the creative person must in a sense disengage [them]self from the environment. (Montuori & Purser, 1995, p. 74)

This approach compels the creative person to disengage in order to replicate artistic success, generating a mythology, not just of self-mastery, but of isolation. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929/2000) is often pointed to as a text that romanticises solitude, but it remains a consciousness-raising essay as it relates to gender and class. Woolf, writing in the 1920s, refutes the historical assumption that male writers possess inherent genius, showing instead that they are the beneficiaries of economic and social privileges. Woolf's argument works to undo the myth of patriarchal self-sufficiency by revealing the structural underpinnings of a writer's solitude: money and social independence.

From Woolf's essay, an awareness grew that writers do not write in a socio-economic void. It does not, however, necessarily counteract the modern concept of subjectivity and still encourages the idea that creativity is located in a neutral or innocent “self” that is in need of protection. In the same year as Woolf's essay, poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929/1984) was published, which famously tells the aspiring poet Franz Kappus, “No one can advise or help you – no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself” (pp. 5–6). Rilke is trying to help the young writer resist literary fashions by telling him to reject dependence on others, to seek an *absolute* solitude, exemplary of high modernist melancholia.

I often wonder about the risks involved in instructing writers to isolate themselves in order to write – their ethical potentiality is a factor, but the writer's happiness is also at stake. Drichel describes what striving for modern subjectivity might look like in a contemporary context:

No longer happily free of entanglements with others, but suffering from a distinct lack or fragility of these entanglements, we meet, in the contemporary “solitary individual,” the Enlightenment subject's sadder cousin – a figure that confronts us with the uncomfortable realisation that the very thing we desire and strive for in our glorifications of solitary and autonomous existence may turn out to be not very good for us. (Drichel, 2019a, p. 2)

Woolf, who was poised on the cusp of modern and postmodern approaches to writing, consciously sought a way out of this isolated position. Three years after Rilke's letter was published, Woolf (1932/2017) wrote a rejoinder in her own “A Letter to a Young Poet”:

But how are you going to get out, into the world of other people? That is your problem now, if I may hazard a guess – to find the right relationship, now that you know yourself, between the self that you know and the world outside. It is a difficult problem. No living poet has, I think, altogether solved it. And there are a thousand voices prophesying despair. (Woolf, 1932/2017, pp. 188–189)

Woolf is not afraid of literary or social influences and cautions against too much time alone. But she still sees a divide between the writer's "self" and "the world outside" – this writer must continue to oscillate between society and their practice, perhaps unable to feel fully content in either.

Poet Adrienne Rich provides a useful bridge between modern and relational approaches to creativity. In "When We Dead Awaken" (1972/2018), written during the 1970s North American women's liberation movement, Rich wrote of her need, as a writer, to find undisturbed time while caring for her family. However, she did not want to jettison her sense of *interdependence*:

I want to make it clear that I am *not* saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker; and I do not accept it. (Rich, 1972/2018, p. 12)

Rich ultimately wants to solve Woolf's dilemma "to find the right relationship" (Woolf, 1932/2017, p. 188), not just in a practical sense but in a way that encompasses the genesis of her creative practice. Her essay concludes, "There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united" (Rich, 1972/2018, pp. 12–13). Rich acknowledges that the writer's relationships with others are not suspended when they go to write. Not only that, but these relationships might also be generative.

We are a crowd of others

Ferrante's description of loud solitude in *Frantumaglia* responds to Rich's prompt by offering a psychically interdependent or *relational* concept of creativity. In his question to Ferrante, Nicola Lagioia asks whether Ferrante sees her characters' interconnection as a blessing. He concludes: "The alternative is to risk absolute solitude. In some cases I confess I have envied these characters" (Ferrante, 2016, p. 355). In referencing an absolute solitude, Lagioia leaves open the possibility of rejecting psychic relationships – although, like Woolf, he recognises this rejection as risky.

Ferrante responds that beginning with her childhood in a crowded Neapolitan neighbourhood, collisions with other people were continual and inescapable: "The others, in the broad meaning of the term, as I said, continuously collide with us and we collide with them. Our singularity, our uniqueness, our identity are continuously dying" (2016, p. 358). This is where Ferrante's

description of selfhood begins to indicate a reversal of modern subjectivity. For her, narrative and actual solitude is continually interconnected and contingent, removing the possibility of an absolute solitude: "In the most absolute tranquility or in the midst of tumultuous events, in safety or danger, in innocence or corruption, we are a crowd of others" (p. 356).

Rather than an attempt at Cartesian self-possession or enactment of the role of the lone genius who transcends their social relationships, Ferrante's writerly isolation is constituted by multiple voices. She attributes them not just to her immediate family and acquaintances, but to people encountered through media and culture:

I'm not talking only about relatives, female friends, enemies. I'm talking about others, men and women who today exist only in images: in television or newspaper images, sometimes heart-rending, sometimes offensive in their opulence. And I'm talking about the past, about what we generally call tradition; I'm talking about all those who were once in the world and who have acted or who now act through us. (Ferrante, 2016, p. 356)

In this way, Ferrante refutes the modern view of creativity which sought to break with tradition and stand apart from "the masses" (Montuori & Purser, 1995, p. 74). The influence of tradition and other voices are, for Ferrante, "certainly a blessing for literature" (2016, p. 356). She acknowledges and invites this multivocal influence, not only in terms of her writing practice, but also her way of thinking. She continues: "I can't even think without the voices of others, much less write" (p. 356). This suggests that the push and pull that writers and theorists have previously posited between the "self" and "the world" is a false choice: when we are alone, we are alone *with* the world.

Ferrante's anonymity

Readers and critics, in reaching out to Ferrante, display a sustained interest in the questions of who is writing her fiction and how is it being produced. Ferrante, for her part, has maintained an open dialogue with the public, providing detailed answers to both these lines of questioning. Her answer to *who* has never included normative identity markers, yet through *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante makes it clear that she is critically engaged with the effect of this refusal. Part of her, as she puts it, "has remained rigorously outside the pages" (2016, p. 302).

Critics regularly prompt her to reveal her identity or explain her motives. Jesper Storgaard Jensen, in 2003, asks for "a brief description – and, if you like physical, as well – of yourself" (Ferrante, 2016, p. 75), which Ferrante refuses. Donadio, in 2014, phrases it more tentatively: "I fully respect your choice, and I'm sure you are tired of this question, but I have to ask it: At what stage in your writing life, and in what spirit, did you choose anonymity?" (p. 245) In answer to this question and others like it, Ferrante presents what I recognise as three overlapping motives: firstly, timidity and avoidance of publicity; secondly, to preserve a space of creative freedom; and, thirdly, to resist positivist categorisation and experiment with choreographing "the figure of the author" (p. 237).

One of the first times she directly addresses the question of her anonymity is in a long (and unsent) response in 1995 to critic Goffredo Fofi. In the letter, Ferrante explains that her desire for privacy is partly due to her “somewhat neurotic desire for intangibility” (2016, p. 49) and a distrust of the “marketplace of culture” (p. 49), which indicates that she does subscribe in part to the separation of the artist from the public, a tension I will explore further when discussing the social and political implications of anonymity below. She also acknowledges that her refusal to appear publicly provides her with an ancillary benefit, one I reference in my introduction, that is: “the freedom to dig deeply, without self-censorship” (p. 191). Ferrante confirms critics’ suspicion that this is partly because there are recognisable autobiographical fragments within her novels, but she insists this is no different from anyone who writes. As her fame increases, she expresses greater interest in the element of control she has over what she reveals to the public through her novels and correspondences – that is, in her ability to continually represent herself through language.

These three motives are articulated in a response to Simonetta Fiori, who asks in 2014 if it is true that Ferrante would give up writing entirely if her identity were discovered. Ferrante explains why she uses a pseudonym:

At first, anxiety about the story I was telling weighed on me. Then the small polemic against every form of publicity was added to it. Today what I fear most is the loss of the completely anomalous creative space I seem to have discovered. It’s not a small thing to write knowing that you can orchestrate for readers not only a story, characters, feelings, landscapes but the very figure of the author (Ferrante, 2016, p. 237)

The irony is that this intention would not be clear without interviews, a bind many authors are forced to negotiate. There still exists the expectation that authors need to market and explain their literary work through public discourse while at the same time remaining critical of, even divested from, those same market pressures. Sreedhevi Iyer (2019), in her recent analysis of novelist Junot Diaz’s metadiscursive practices, identifies this bind in the way Diaz is asked to comment on the “cultural authenticity” of his writing, a question he faces often as an author of colour. Iyer points out, “the paradox here is that Diaz in his response is still required to discuss it as a means of dismissing its relevance” (2019, p 389). Gomeri poet and legal scholar Alison Whittaker articulates this perfectly when speaking about what anonymity might mean for her creative practice. In a public forum titled *Ask Me Anything* at the 2019 Emerging Writers Festival National Conference, Whittaker spoke about not satisfying the expectation, stemming from white literary audiences, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors must perform autobiographical trauma in their storytelling in order to be considered “important”. Following the discussion, she was asked by an audience member: “Would you like to write under a nom de plume?” (2019). Whittaker responded, “Sure, I’d love to. If I did, though, you’d never know, would you?” (2019).

In Ferrante’s case, I would argue that her written interviews are, in part, fulfilling an ethical imperative to critically engage with questions of authorial intention, indicating she is not satisfied with fundamental post-structural indifference or complete obscurity. She wants the

reader to know Elena Ferrante is a nom de plume and will answer questions regarding her literary practice in great detail. However, she continues to refuse requests to reveal a biographical or normative identity.

Relational ethics

Next, I wish to demonstrate how Ferrante's withholding of normative identity aligns with Judith Butler's critique of social ontology in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), to illustrate how her anonymity might enact a relational ethics. Flora Ghezzeo and Sara Teardo also turn to Butler in "On Lila's Traces: *Bildung*, Narration, and Ethics in Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale*" (2019), their literary analysis of Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet. In summarising Butler's theory, they argue: "Opacity is in fact for her at the basis of the *ethical* encounter with the other" (p. 187). While Ghezzeo and Teardo apply this to the relationships in the novels, I believe Ferrante depicts not just her characters but also the literary author as "a subject that is relational, embodied, opaque, exposed to others, intertwined with other lives, a subject that challenges the patriarchal idea of an independent, abstract, and sovereign subject conceived by traditional political thought" (Ghezzeo & Teardo, 2019, p. 187).

For Butler, the way we describe ourselves relies on language that is historically and socially contingent. Any narration, fiction or non-fiction, necessarily contains language over which the "I" has no individual claim:

When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. (Butler, 2005, pp. 7–8)

As this quote indicates, for Butler, all self-narration inevitably engages in critical and historical excavation. Through choices in terms and emphasis, speakers give credence to some histories and not others, which necessarily contain omissions and absences, asserting an identity that is always theoretical. The speaker uses social precepts or norms, but they are never satisfactory, as they cannot articulate the singularity of the author's life. Instead, the speaker negotiates a set of relations to identity categories. This negotiation is, in essence, an operation of critique (Butler, 2005, p. 8).

Butler's own way of negotiating gender and sexuality categories can be observed in an interview published in *Reclaiming genders* (More, 1999) when Kate More asks, "I was really interested when someone suggested you might see yourself as 'a butch dyke' unquote. I wonder how – whether – you construct yourself juridically and if you do anything with your own portrayal of gender norms?" (p. 285). Butler responds,

What's clear is that I have an uneasy relationship to categorization, I accept that categories exist and I even use them, and yet the point of my work is not to figure out

a proper or adequate mode of description for myself and I hope I would never come up with such a thing ... How can I say this? I'm engaged by them and that I negotiate my identity in terms of them. (More, 1999, p. 286)

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005) is interested in how this failure to be fully transparent and committed to identity categories might in fact indicate a new ethical methodology, that of “decentering” the subject and emphasising the primacy of relationality. For Butler, autobiographical narration is always incomplete because it stands in relation to norms and structures of address that are outside the narrator's control. A demand for conclusive visibility and self-identity is therefore impossible to fulfil and oppressive to insist upon. Butler asks:

If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure? Or is it a failure that gives rise to another ethical disposition in the place of a full and satisfying notion of narrative accountability? Is there in this affirmation of partial transparency a possibility for acknowledging a relationality that binds me more deeply to language and to you than I previously knew? And is the relationality that conditions and blinds this “self” not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics? (Butler, 2005, p. 40)

Returning then to Ferrante's praxis – what critics might read as a *failure* to appear publicly or provide a “satisfying notion of narrative accountability” (Butler, 2005, p. 40) might in fact represent a rigorous ethical methodology.

Ferrante, too, wants to bind herself and readers “more deeply to language” (Butler, 2005, p. 40). She believes that the author she presents in *Frantumaglia* is, in her words, “the most genuine figure, because it's created from writing alone” (2016, p. 237). Writing, for Ferrante, “has taken possession of the person who writes, and if we want to find that person, she, too, is there, revealing a self that she may not even truly know” (p. 263). Here, Ferrante acknowledges that writing is always partially opaque to its author. This opacity, for Butler and Ferrante, affirms the roles that both the addressee and language play in self-narration, thereby decentering the author as the autonomous literary authority and inviting in the crowd of others. This crowd for Ferrante, as discussed, consists of sociocultural discourse, friends, enemies and literary traditions. Now this can also be extended to include the reader, who is invited into the scene of address. As Ferrante says, “it is the reader's job to light the fuse of the words” (p. 260).

When critics ask Ferrante, “who are you?”, she refrains from providing normative terms of identity: appearance, gender, race, class, age. By withholding these terms, she forces the reader to work without these categories, instead providing de-identified language and self-narration. That does not mean that Ferrante is completely unknown to the reader, it just means the reader is forced to *theorise*, which, Butler (2005) argues, is the only way to access or form an ethical social identity. Butler also clarifies that bodily “exposure”, while it may be singular, will not provide a full account of identity, as it has a history that is “non-narratizable” (2005, p. 39). Therefore, for Ferrante to appear publicly would not offer conclusive clarification regarding

her authorial identity. Ferrante argues that the media, by relying on photos and reviews, detracts from the more-than-dyadic relationship between the author, the story and the reader. As Ferrante says in a response to Simonetta Fiori, “Our faces, all of them, do not do us any favors, and our lives add nothing to the work” (2016, p. 235).

Butler (2005) proposes that we should not expect complete coherence or self-knowledge from others' self-narration, just as we cannot expect it from our own. This leads to a mutual acceptance of partial opacity, and a disposition of humility and generosity, as there is no site of ontological closure (p. 42). As a reader of Ferrante's fiction, Tortorici argues that Ferrante's anonymity has a similar reciprocal quality: “The persona of the author is an intrusion on the solitary psychic space of a novel. By protecting her privacy, Ferrante protected ours” (2016). Tortorici sees that the identity of the author is an imposition on the process of reading and invokes the “creative freedom” that Ferrante means to create for herself as a writer, showing that it also extends to the reader. As Tortorici says, Ferrante's absence “enabled the writer to write and the reader to read” (2016).

What also strikes me about Tortorici's quote is that she references a “solitary psychic space” (2016) which supposes that literature itself is not a psychic interruption. This leads back to the questions of modern subjectivity and the ethical implications of writing in solitude which I address later. In order to continually emphasise subjective interconnectedness, but without giving up the autonomy of solitude that Tortorici and Ferrante evidently desire, I now return to the notion of loud solitude to capture this paradox.

Loud solitude

The above arguments, regarding the alignment between Ferrante's praxis and Butler's theory of relational ethics, clarify several of Ferrante's motives for remaining anonymous: firstly, her polemic against the media and, secondly, her attachment to antinormative self-representation. I will now turn to the final motive, which I categorise above as her desire to preserve her solitude, in other words, a space of creative freedom in which to write.

Ferrante claims anonymity provides her with “a space that seems full of possibilities” (2016, p. 245). When asked whether it has helped her write with sincerity, she cautions:

I don't know. I've always had a tendency to separate everyday life from writing. To tolerate existence, we lie, and we lie above all to ourselves ... It seems likely that making a clear separation between what we are in life and what we are when we write helps keep self-censorship at bay. (Ferrante, 2016, p. 70)

Ferrante describes this elsewhere as “writing with the knowledge that I don't have to appear produces a space of absolute creative freedom” (2016, p. 52). Without further context, her reference to a “separate” everyday life and “absolute” freedom evokes the modern lone genius. As I've argued, it is the pursuit of this freedom that might also become a pursuit of an autonomy

which denies reliance on and accountability towards others, tending towards a Cartesian model of authorial mastery. In the model, the modern writer imagines that they are in complete possession of their selfhood and that this “self” is creatively sufficient and fundamentally authoritative. Creative freedom, in this context, is predicated on social and psychic isolation.

However, as discussed, Ferrante clearly refutes that her writing practice is a wholly individual or lonely experience. She describes a crowded, interrupted subjectivity, where the coherence and stability of her self-identity are continuously being challenged and dissolved by her encounters with others. She also attests to her public and private life being busy and satisfactory; she has a life outside of writing. Finally, Ferrante is explicit about the fact that her practice relies on literary traditions rather than striving to create something purely individual and innovative (2016, p. 298). These convictions inform how she writes and how she believes her writing should be read.

With all these conditions in place, Ferrante's writerly solitude then becomes a place where she can put herself and her history “at risk” (2016, p. 303) in her work, in order to write about her own intimate history, not as a confession, but as a critical interrogation of society and subjectivity. Returning to the quote from earlier, Ferrante acknowledges that “Like anyone who writes, I work with events, feelings, emotions that belong to me very intimately” (2016, p. 191), but she does this in a way that implicates, rather than exonerates, her from social and psychic interconnection. She articulates this in her reply to Nicola Lagioia: “If we look carefully, we *are* the destabilizing collisions that we suffer or cause, and the story of those collisions is our true story” (2016, p. 358).

Butler concludes in *Giving an Account of Oneself* that “ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness” (2005, p. 136), because in doing so, the subject embraces the primacy of relationality and avoids assertions of self-knowledge that would lead back to Cartesian narcissism. Ferrante's anonymity provides her the space to take this risk and also the ability to vacate a position of authority, allowing the writing to be addressed, claimed and undone by the reader.

My exploration of anonymity now presents a complete illustration of how Ferrante might enact the paradox identified earlier, that of combining crowded or *loud* relationality with private intimacy and *solitude* in her writing practice. Anonymity achieves both of these outcomes: firstly, by allowing her to draw on incoherent, amoral experiences to write her fiction without having to face public scrutiny that would compare her life to her writing. Finally, it allows her identity to remain ambiguous and diffuse, forcing readers to productively theorise about the makeup of authorial voice, including its ties to literary traditions and other social discourses. In this way, she writes in solitude but is not necessarily lonely and she writes her own stories but does not claim they are the product of a discrete and original voice.

Blessing/curse

I have now argued that Ferrante's writing praxis is both personal and multivocal and that her requests for privacy are not necessarily an abdication of authorial accountability as she makes clear through her written correspondences. It becomes tempting, then, to consider relationality as a "blessing" for creativity. However, it is worth considering how also it makes us, in Ferrante's words, "ethically unstable" (2016, pp. 357–358) and to show how a relational model of creativity does not automatically resolve the tension created by authorial anonymity.

Mari Ruti provides two useful critiques of relationality in her essay "The Bad Habits of Critical Theory" (2016) in which she assesses Butler's rhetoric. Ruti's essay is a backlash to what she sees as the increasingly indiscriminate deconstruction of subjectivity, whereby the disappearance of the subject and the ascendancy of relational forces provides theorists with an *automatic* ethical methodology. She points to two reflexive gestures made by critical theorists that limit the ways in which they can contribute to socio-political projects. The first is the post-structural "pulverization of the subject" and the second is "radical antinormativity" (2016, p. 5). Ruti maintains that both of these become ethical imperatives for Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. I also attribute these habits to Butler in order to show where Butler's and Ferrante's views about relationality diverge.

Ruti argues that Butler's habitual suspicion of self-autonomy leads her to "exaggerate the merits of vulnerability, dependence, and attachment" (2016, p. 17). On this point, Ferrante's argument in *Frantumaglia* is similar to Ruti's, as she counters Lagioia's optimism and attests to the value of autonomy that can be found in withdrawal or disappearance. In doing so, Ferrante again affirms the fact that absence is not always indifference. She provides the example: "The disappearance of women should be interpreted not only as giving up the fight against the violence of the world but also a clear rejection ... Rejection means shunning the games of those who crush the weak" (2016, p. 317).

I have argued so far that Ferrante's anonymity is a provocation to adopt an ethical disposition theorised by Butler, that of accepting that authorial identity will always remain partially opaque. However, if we employ or extend Butler's ethics of opacity, the reader would be empowered to see and hear an author in person and to be presented with a string of normative identify markers and still offer a form of recognition that suspends moral judgement.

In considering this hypothetical, it becomes clear that Butler's proposal for an ethics of mutual opacity is not necessarily reliable, as it cannot be assumed that Ferrante's or any other author's appearance would be met with the patience and generosity Butler desires. As she says, Ferrante is not wrong to act on:

well-founded fear that the media, because of its current nature, that is, lacking a true vocation for "public interest," would be inclined, carelessly, to restore a private quality to an object that originated precisely to give a less circumscribed meaning to individual experience. (Ferrante, 2016, p. 51)

As has been discussed, decentring subjectivity in order to emphasise the role of language and the addressee is a viable ethical imperative in certain contexts. Ruti gives as an example, firstly, the time and place in which French post-structuralism initially emerged to combat “the Man of Metaphysics” (2016, p. 8). Her second example is resistance to gender and sexuality norms (2016, p. 16), a resistance that can also be observed in Butler’s interview with More (2019). I suggest a further example is Ferrante’s battle against positivist literary criticism, as discussed previously.

However, the reasons why Ferrante chooses invisibility attest to the difficulty of relying on relationality as the underlying motive for ethics. Ruti, in her critique of Butler, agrees that “ethics needs to *address* relationality” but she is not persuaded that “relationality offers a sufficiently reliable *foundation* for it” because “too many things can go wrong” (2016, p. 16). Relying on others for recognition risks being misrecognised, misrepresented and otherwise psychically violated, without mentioning the physical risks. This points to the potential benefits of public anonymity for writers with socially precarious subject-positions and also to the bind that must be continually addressed in the public sphere: that any imperative of visibility must be accompanied by an imperative of safety.

Returning one last time, then, to Ferrante’s response to Lagioia, when Lagioia frames of interdependence as a blessing, Ferrante makes sure to point out that psychic interconnectedness is not “an antidote” for social conflict (2016, p. 356). She continues, “when we consider the materiality of days, the daily struggle of living, it’s hard to play this game of reversals: curse/blessing, blessing/curse” (p. 356). A relational solitude is not a place where conflict can be entirely avoided but a place where it echoes. This is the central dilemma Drichel identifies when considering relationality’s potential:

Relationality is both a promise and a problem for us: relationality, that is to say, is the pivot point for a set of conflicting impulses. On the one hand, relationality is frequently associated with ethical potentiality: as inherently relational beings we are co-implicated in each others’ lives, and drawn into responsibility for those with whom we stand in relation. On the other hand, however, what the focus on relationality throws into sharp relief for us is the sheer difficulty of guarding this ethical impulse in our everyday lived encounters – both personal and political. (Drichel, 2015)

These final critiques illustrate that writing in solitude will always entail ethical risks and that authors still need to question when and why they utilise, omit or refuse normative identity categories. The difficulty for the contemporary author becomes: in developing a literary writing practice, how do they tell the difference between an ethical or polemic sacrificing of identity categories and an indifferent one? What writing veers towards anti-authorial self-sacrifice and what represents an avoidance of accountability? These are the final provocations of this article, too large to be addressed here, which can be answered by each author according to their socio-political contexts.

Conclusion

A lot of debate revolves around what literary writers are engaging *with* in their moments of solitude. Why the need for privacy? What is its value? What are the risks and benefits of placing the writer “in a room of their own”? I have now identified images of the “enlightened Cartesian subject” in literature, that is, the archetype of the lone literary genius who was once raised on the same pedestal as the “existential cowboy” (Drichel, 2019b, p. 7). In line with Drichel’s hypothesis, this carefree author, as a result of their solitude, may in fact be miserable and – just as dangerously – ethically adrift, as indicated by Woolf’s reference to the “thousand voices prophesying despair” (1932/2017, p. 189) and Rich’s to the “devouring ego” (1972/2018, p. 12).

This model of authorship is evidently something Ferrante aims to challenge, partly, through her correspondence with critics in *Frantumaglia* and, partly, by maintaining her anonymity. I have argued that proponents of relational theory, such as Melanie Klein and Judith Butler, have directly informed Ferrante’s enactment of literary authorship. Their influence can be seen in her description of a crowded, interrupted subjectivity and in her refusal to provide normative biographical information.

This is what Ferrante means when she says: “when one makes a creative work, one is inhabited by others – in some measure becomes another” (2016, p. 49). At the same time, her anonymity, despite it being loud and interconnected, provides her with the autonomy to “dig deeply, without self-censorship” (p. 191). By refusing to fully individuate herself, Ferrante prompts us to view her authorship as a vocal composite that forms part of more-than-dyadic negotiation of meaning, a negotiation which emphasises the social uses of language, literary traditions and reader responses.

She answers Rich’s call to find ways “in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united” (Rich, 1972/2018, pp. 12–13) by proposing that our collisions with others, physically and psychically, are generative for literature. Her response to Lagioia could be a response to Rich when she says: “We are, as you say, interconnected. And we should teach ourselves to look deeply at this interconnection – I call it a tangle, or, rather, *frantumaglia* – to give ourselves adequate tools to describe it” (Ferrante, 2016, p. 356). Ethical entanglements, then, are inescapable, loud, even in solitude, even while they form the basis of a writing practice and even in obscurity.

This study does not intend to offer Ferrante’s literary writing praxis as a conclusive model. However, I argue that her desire for creative freedom does not resort to a denial of social interdependence and ethical accountability and, overall, her anonymity provides a challenging and productive illustration of contemporary authorship.

References

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. (S. Heath, Trans.) Hill and Wang.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13x01rf.6>
- Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Drichel, S. (2015). Cartesian narcissism. In R. Bernasconi, R. Diprose, D. Goodman (Keynote speakers), *Relationality: A symposium* [Symposium], University of Ontago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
<https://relationality2015.wordpress.com/>
- Drichel, S. (2019a). Relationality. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 24(3), 1–2.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1620445>
- Drichel, S. (2019b, May). “The Most Perfectly Autonomous Man”: Relational subjectivity and the crisis of connection. *Angelaki*, 24(3), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1620446>
- Ferrante, E. (2016). *Frantumaglia* (A. Goldstein, Trans.). Europa Books.
- Ghezzo, F., & Teardo, S. (2019). On Lila's traces: *Bildung*, narration, and ethics in Elena Ferrante's *L'amica Geniale*. *MLN*, 134(1), 172–192. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2019.0009>
- Iyer, S. (2019). “Will the real writer please stand up”: Flawed discursive self-presentation by Junot Diaz. *Writing and Pedagogy*, 11(3), 375–410. <https://doi.org/10.1558/wap.35202>
- Klein, M. C. (1935). A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 16, 145–174. <https://pep-web.org/browse/IJP/volumes/16?page=145>.
- Montuori, A., & Purser, R. E. (1995). Deconstructing the lone genius myth: Toward a contextual view of creativity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 35(3), 69–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F00221678950353005>
- More, K. (2019). Never mind the bollocks: 2. Judith Butler on transsexuality. In K. More & S. Whittle (Eds.), *Reclaiming genders* (pp. 285–302). Cassell.
- Rich, A. (2018). *Essential essays*. W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1972)
- Rilke, R. M. (1984). *Letters to a young poet*. (S. Mitchell, Trans.). Random House. (Original work published 1929)
- Ruti, M. (2016). The bad habits of critical theory. *The Comparatist*, 40, 5–27.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26254752>.
- Tortorici, D. (2016, October 2). Bluebeard. *N+I*. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/bluebeard>
- Whittaker, A. (2019, June 22). Ask me anything [Conference session]. Emerging Writers Festival, The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, Australia.
- Woolf, V. (2017). A letter to a young poet. In V. Woolf (Eds.), *The death of the moth & other essays* (pp. 177–207). Musaicum. (Original work published 1932)

Woolf, V. (2000). *A Room of one's own*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1929)