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Abstract: Narrative desire, according to philosopher Adriana Cavarero, is the desire for one's own history. What can semiotics of literature say about friendship as a dialogic phenomenon and the narrative desire for personal-historical knowledge in friendship, and how is this kind of knowledge semiotically different from knowledge achieved by science and scholarship?

As an interpersonal relation, friendship is discussed here from the perspective of semiotics and precarious knowledge, i.e., as a historically contingent relation that can be semiotically modelled (represented by mappings that are to some degree cognitively adequate and emotionally convincing) both within fiction literature and academic disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology and history. Friendship as a complex phenomenon has recently received increased attention from many distinct theoretical perspectives and disciplines. There are forms of "hidden interdisciplinarity" in friendship studies, as well as mono- and multidisciplinary approaches. A good case in point is recent discussions on how well a novel can model friendship. The opposite claims of philosopher Alexander Nehamas and literary critic Gregory Jusdanis on the adequacy of the novel for describing friendship will be discussed.

By considering 'The Neapolitan Novels' by Elena Ferrante, depicting a close, difficult, life-long friendship between two women and its concerns with precarious dialogues and knowledge (like what the two very different persons really know about each other), as well as recent scholarship on Ferrante's work, I show how her novels are not just inspired by, but also indirectly a critical comment upon the work on narrative friendship by Cavarero. Friends differ, and some of their differences constitute a challenge for universal models of friendship and narrative desire.

Furthermore, Ferrante's novels add a challenging complexity to a central insight analysed by Santaella as Peirce's dialogism – that the action of signs are not merely individual but social, and that this applies as well to the person, whose thoughts are what she is "saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time" (CP 5.421; Santaella 2004: 132). The novels can be seen as modelling the very genesis of that dialogic self in the precarious process of finding a balance between dependency and autonomy between the friends.

Key Words: friendship, precarious knowledge, narratology, interdisciplinarity, literature as semiotic modelling.

21. Dialogic knowledge in friendship as represented by literature and research.

Claus Emmeche

"meaning can only emerge in the interaction of voices, in the shifts and intersections between a speaker and a listener"
Lucia Santaella (2004, p. 130)

1. Introduction: What is known, and by whom?

In fiction, it is more common to see stories about romantic love than friendship. Similarly, in social science and the humanities, friendship as a special interpersonal relation appears less researched than love and family relationships – although some friendship research has been done within the disciplines of psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, philosophy, and even literary criticism. Academics from these disciplines are among the first to lament missing research and limited knowledge. Seen from the perspective of a knowledge relation, friendship seems to be even less mapped out. What do I know about my friend, and in what way? It is usually said that good fiction helps make us wiser, for even if narrations are fictive, they provide signposts or semiotic models that can be compared with, and give perspective to, personal experience and knowledge. Does that also apply for friendship? We all know what friendship is … or do we?

In the modern epoch, a lot of ideals have circulated about the good friendship as a close, intimate, personal, devoted, affectionate, but not so much erotic or sexual relation; yet these are normative narrative scripts about the psychology of friendship that are only partly in line with what ancient thinkers experienced and wrote about friendship as an ethical-political relation. There is a great distance from Plato's friendships with Socrates and Aristotle to Emily Dickinson's friendships with Susan Gilbert and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (cf. Wineapple, 2009), and we know more about what Aristotle wrote about friendship (Price, 1989; Pangle, 2013) than about the character of the friendships he had himself. We assume that, just like the concepts of freedom and justice, friendship as a normative concept is historically changeable and socially modulated according to markers such as age, gender,

ethnicity, class, and culture. Though one could locate some general conceptions and 'knowledge' of friendship within a given culture, different languages do not embody identical concepts of friendship (Wierzbicka, 1997), and among human beings there are myriads of concretely experienced friendships and the corresponding personal knowledge about them, ranging from the immediately experienced to a *knowing* about a particular friend, as well as knowledge about the relationship of friendship

itself. This knowing exists in part as a tacit knowledge, and in part as a linguistic-discursive, reflexive knowledge that can be told to, and discussed with, others.

If we conceive of human knowledge as a large ecosystem of signs, its many niches are only partly interconnected and combine sluggishly. This also applies to the parts produced by scientific disciplines. Though disciplines exchange knowledge across their borders, this exchange and turnover of knowledge is marked by friction, isolated points, chance, and different perspectives that cannot easily mutually translate and still less become unified. Knowledge about friendship is only slowly percolating through the different layers of the ecosystem, and it crosses only with difficulty precarious borders between the personal-private and the public, the tacit and the explicit knowledge, the particular and the universal, or between what is experienced and what is understood.

Attempts to categorize and grasp those ties between people called friendship get complicated because of the multiplicity of kinds of friendships, as well as the multiplicity of research fields dealing with this. There is no uniform conception of friendship as, for instance, a form of love, a social tie, a feeling of mutual affection, a power relation, an intrinsic value, an achieved non-ascribed relationship, a family resemblance concept, or whatever we call it when trying to conceptualize the notion. There is a diversity of models of friendship constructed by different research disciplines, and some interdisciplinary overlaps and interconnections (with singular research texts contributing to several fields, cf. Emmeche, 2017). Moreover, fiction provides us with even more possible models of friendship. Models in science are well analysed by philosophy of science, e.g., as mediating devices between theory and data, but from the point of view of knowledge history (Engberg-Pedersen, 2014) there is an additional point in using the notion of models within the field of literature. Both in science and scholarship (Winther, 2020), as well as in literature one finds a productive semiosis of mappings that represent selected aspects of the world of

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phenomena. Those that are about friendship may help guide us when searching for insight about this somewhat puzzling relationship.

And yet, recently, the American philosopher Alexander Nehamas (2016), in his book *On Friendship,* advanced the provocative thesis that as a type of relationship, friendship cannot be a focal topic for high quality literature. As a special kind of love, friendship is realized, according to Nehamas, in the calm tropisms of everyday life and completely lacks the capacity for the kind of dramatic plot that attracts readers of excellent literature. In contrast, and independently of Nehamas, literary critic Gregory Jusdanis described friendship as *A Tremendous Thing*, which is also the title of his recent analysis of friendships in art and literature from *the Iliad* to the age of the internet. Jusdanis' thesis is that friendship — by relying upon and sharpening the capacity for sensitively reading quite other minds — is deeply related to literature. We love literature almost in the same way that we love our friends; we need both for the same reason. To get friends is a process

similar to engagement in fiction. In both affairs, we are challenged to "project yourself into the mind and heart of another" (Jusdanis, 2014, p. 2). Also, other philosophers and literary critics, inspired by authors like Karen Blixen (Cavarero, 2000) and Thomas Bernard (Moore & Frederick, 2017), have begun to take an interest in friendship, its tight connection to story telling, and its role in the making of a personal identity.

Let us take a closer look at the contrasting views of Nehamas and Jusdanis on friendship in literature from the perspective of philosophy of interdisciplinarity[1] and 'precarious knowledge': Historical research, especially in Germany, has seen a recent surge of studies in the history of knowledge, *Wissengechichte*, that use 'knowledge' as a vantage point for a historicized gaze upon the field of modern history (Sarasin, 2011) — including a history of what has been called precarious knowledge (Mulsow, 2012).[2] Precarious knowledge is not just about the history and epistemology of institutionalized science, it deals also with more peripheral areas such as magic and numismatics, biblical interpretation and non-Western studies. In this perspective, friendship as well as friendship studies are

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obvious places to look for precarious knowledge. Thus, as we shall see, friendship can be analysed on at least three levels: First, research on friendship from the disciplinary approaches of anthropology, history, psychology and philosophy; second, literary analyses of fiction literature on friendship; and third, the very precarious knowledge that a literary text conveys to a reader and even to a theorist of narrative friendship.

As Jusdanis has shown, there are many novels on friendship to choose from, and we could add to his long list the German novel *Gechichte der Freundschaft* by Michael Roes (2010) and *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2015). However, both novels would easily be dismissed from the perspective of Nehamas, as he could claim, with some right, that they are not really novels about friendship; they both deal (albeit very differently) with the painful border transgression from friendship to passionate love or companionship. Much harder would it be to argue that Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels in four volumes were not about a friendship; they are actually candidate for being a refutation of Nehamas' hypothesis. We will examine the friendship between the two main characters in Ferrante's masterpiece, and how it involves precarious knowledge. Drawing upon the reception of Ferrante's work, we will also note how the Neapolitan Novels can be read as a critical comment upon one of their inspirational sources, Adriana Cavarero's work on narrative desire.

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[1] Cf. the comparative narrative *Undisciplining Knowledge* (Graff 2015) and Joe Moran's *Interdisciplinarity* (Moran 2010) with the study of English as its main example.

[2] Cf. the research done at *the Zentrum Geschichte des Wissens* (ZGW) at the University of Zürich, see https://www.zgw.ethz.ch

2. A milder affair?

Friendship for Alexander Nehamas is predominantly a slow, trivial living together with those people you like, engage in, and choose to spend at least some time together with. He does not deny that literature in its narrative forms can describe friendship, and admit that its slow processes need not be a problem – novels take many forms and have few principal constraints, and even trifling events or pointless actions can be given an aesthetic form that has value in itself. But Nehamas justifies his scepticism by a kind of discovery, as he calls it, namely how rare it is to see an excellent novel having friendship as its primary topic. Many works in fiction involve friendship, sometimes even between the chief characters, but according to Nehamas, none of them are *about* friendship. Based upon his own hit list of classics, he notes that they are instead about adventure, loyalty, human frailty, responsibility, courage in war; or they may be about love, desire, adultery, jealousy, acquisition of culture and coming of age, but

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they are not about friendship. Nehamas notes that one can find friendship dealt with in lyrical poetry or in the form of drama for theatre, radio, or television, but he argues that the novel is not suitable for treating friendship in any depth, because normally, friendship manifests itself in the most ordinary everyday situations that all other but the friends will find "irredeemably boring" (Nehamas, 2016, p. 87). Yet because Nehamas finds his own thesis irritating, he looks out for counter examples.

In this search, he admits that it is not impossible to find a novel on friendship, and as one of these possible counter-examples he mentions Ann Patchett's remembrance novel *Truth and Beauty*. It is about Ann's relation to her friend, the author Lucy Grealy. But here the focus, according to Nehamas, is not the relationship itself, but Lucy's own person: her ambitions, disease and tragic life. She was suffering a kind of cancer that slowly degenerated her jaw, so she had to go through countless operations. Lucy's person and suffering indeed takes up a large part of the story, but Nehamas misses something central. If the story is read with attention to what the two friends share and do together, this will crack open a different understanding of the relationship between friendship and literature; not only because of the two women's passion for writing (Ann notes that "Our friendship was like our writing in some ways. It was the only thing that was interesting about our otherwise very dull lives", Patchett, 2004, p. 73), but also by showing that the friend's story, ending here in an elegiac mode, testifies *who* that person was as a unique person, and thereby this told story confirms the friendship (cf. Cavarero, see below). While modern friendship for Nehamas has become extremely ordinary – no longer a place for elevated feelings like in the epic tradition, or in dramas about sacrifice, death, revenge and sadness, it has now become "a milder affair" (Nehamas, 2016, p. 87) – Patchett's novel, at once biographical and autobiographical, actually shows how friendship can be just as passionate as erotic love, even though the friends don't have sex.

3. Literary friendship

Gregory Jusdanis' thesis on the intrinsic relatedness of literature and friendship is neither new (similar ideas has been suggested by Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum, as also discussed by Jusdanis) or very clear. Sometimes it is a thesis about the similarity between the cognitive processes involved in both contexts, like interpretation, empathy and improvisation. Both the generation of a friendship and the creation of fiction can be viewed

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as exercises in the art of telling stories and building bridges across differences, and in both cases a deeper understanding is aimed at Jusdanis (2014, p. 27, compare p. 53, 147).

At other places, the thesis is sharpened and it is claimed that a real friendship, in order to succeed, must have something 'literary' about itself: Friendship *needs* a literary perspective. And this implies, for Jusdanis, a capacity to find one's way into another person through imagination (ibid., p. 32). Here, the very empathic sensibility becomes an aesthetic category and a projective capacity. This is close to a form of inverted reduction compared to popular attempts to reduce aesthetics to cognitive psychology.

Finally, Jusdanis explores many illustrations of a much weaker but quite reasonable thesis, namely that literature reflects how the conceptions of friendship within a society, like its placement as a private or public phenomenon, are shifting over time (cf. Österberg, 2010; Caine, 2009). Thus, based upon an analysis of Montaigne's famous essay on his lost friend La Boétie, Jusdanis claims that the modern self, in discovering its own isolation, is longing for friendship's intimacy, mirroring and self knowledge, and so from this point on, "friendship begins to equal knowledge and vice versa" (ibid., p. 81). This can be read as a pointed formulation of a tendency within modernity, described by sociologists like Giddens (1992), towards a situation in which individuals themselves try to negotiate the character of their interrelationships, rather than having to adapt to a pre-existent form. In this way, modern friendship becomes self-validating, and intimacy becomes a confidential disclosure to the friend of what the self prefers to remain hidden from the public gaze (Jusdanis, 2014, p. 78, 100).

If we for a moment shift attention from the friends' exchange of special knowledge to the sociology of knowledge with respect to friendship studies, we see that scientific and scholarly studies often seem to contain strange gaps, as manifestations of simple obliviousness, social memory loss or disciplinary tunnel vision. For instance, both Nehamas and Jusdanis forget (or at least neglect) Victor Luftig's important treatment of gender between the sexes in English literature from Victorianism's John Stuart Mill to Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group. Taking departure from the movie *When Harry Met Sally…* Luftig poses the same sceptic question as Nehamas, but in a way suggesting another answer: How can a novel be

genuinely and robustly about friendship, rather than about friendship as an intermediary step to the 'real' thing that a

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novel (in the period treated) has to be about, namely marriage? (Luftig, 1993, p. 13ff).[3] Luftig comments upon theories of novelistic endings and reminds us that in the Victorian epoch, when marriage was the defining *telos* of women, what happens after marriage became rather uninteresting, trivial and with no possible plot. Luftig's exposition of the attempt by the Bloomsbury Group to break the Victorian pattern – through experiments with collaboration and friendship, also between men and women within a creative community – highlights relations in which the other is not the primary object, but one with whom you see and explore the world.

Another contribution ignored by Nehamas and Jusdanis is Janet Todd's (1990) investigation of female friendships in ten works of 18th Century literature. Todd illustrates the diversity of friendships by organising the novels in five categories, according to whether the character of the relationship is primarily sentimental, erotic, manipulative, political, or social in nature; while yet admitting mutual overlaps and the purely analytical status of the taxonomy. The novels are almost always about a romantic connection between a man and a woman, loaded with conflict. The woman seldomly chooses her lover, that is the business of her family, and man and woman remain foreign to each other, both caught in their own gender. Only the confidential friendship with another woman is actively construed by the female protagonist herself. Therefore, the exchange of confidences through letters has a prominent place. The letter becomes a literary tool for an edifying character formation, not only for its author: the protagonists, too, achieve a knowledge about themselves and each other through letters. Todd's study suggests the hypothesis that even if romantic love is the centre of most of the novels' plot, friendships are far from peripheral, but are instead integral themes of the narrative, in a parallel axis of care, character formation and understanding. Friendship thus allows the female writer to "use a romantic plot, while placing her passion elsewhere" (Todd, 1990, p. 413).

4. Knowledge in precarious relations

Researchers from various areas of friendship studies have looked into the precarious and ambivalent aspects of this relationship. For instance, historians have investigated the discourse of friendship as it is used at the fuzzy borders between friendship and patronage, and

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the tensions between formal personal autonomy and being dependent upon the service of influential friends (Crook, 2013; Rahe, 1997). Anthropologists have registered culturally determined patterns of friendship, such as friends in networks

[3] On the *telos* of women Luftig (p. 239) quotes Rachel Blau DuPlessis: "the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social – successful courtship, marriage – or judgmental of her sexual and social failure – death".

enmeshed in favouritism, making affairs work more smoothly (including patronage, cf. the classic study by Pitt-Rivers 1954), versus cultures in which you passionately and possessively are close friends with just one or very few (Reina, 1959), and they have discussed dilemmas in using 'friendship as a method' in ethnographic field work (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) when an informant of the ethnographer becomes a friend in such a rather unequal yet often close relationship (de Regt, 2015, 2019). Psychologists and sociologists have performed many studies on the problems with friendship and identity across gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (e.g., Harré & Moghaddam, 2013). Philosophers have discussed the perils and risks of friendship in a tension between honesty and dissimulation and suggested that friends never know each other fully, so a certain foreignness or strangeness is intrinsic to friendship (Vernon, 2005, chap. 3: "Faking it"; Holst, 2015, p. 58ff). Such an unfathomable and constant non-knowledge about the friend sets limits to the degree of self-awareness and insight that is enabled by friendship in the classical sense. Aristotle in his ethics famously described the friend as "another self" but this classical conception of friendship as a way to self-knowledge has been much debated and countered by contemporary reports on interpersonal relations on social media (e.g., Deresiewicz (2009) for a literary critique of Facebook's illusions; Jensen & Sørensen (2013) for an empirical exploration of how people actually handle different norms for friendship online). To the extent that online exchanges are more like the narcissistic mirroring of a fragile self, not all of what is termed friendship online will help increase an individual's knowledge of the self. This is far from the ideal in Aristotle, even though also his teachings on friendship have been accused of being tainted by a modicum of narcissism.[4] Rather than a mirroring function, genuine friendship can be seen as a place in which the friend is willing to be dragged along new directions by the other: The person does not see herself *in* the other, but *through* the other, i.e., through the friend's engagement and interpretation (Cocking & Kennett, 1998, p. 509; scholarship on Aristotle's theory of friendship, including the idea of the friend as "another self", is vast, but Pangle (2013) is a good starting point).

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The fragile vulnerability of friendship to breaches of trust, jealousy, power struggles and competing relationships with family and kin has also been studied and seems particularly evident in societies where there are not yet any strong state building processes. Examples can be found in the Icelandic sagas, as reinterpreted by anthropologists (shifting their former focus from kin to other ties) and by historians of ideas, who have considered the political and alliance-related significance of the sagas' friendships (Durrenberger & Pálsson, 1999; Österberg, 2007, p. 79ff, 2010, p. 41ff; Sigurðsson & Småberg, 2013; Holst, 2015, p. 52f.). Here, friends do not appear as a way towards self-insight or as intimate conversation partners, but as a necessary strategic resource. In medieval Iceland, it was crucial

[4] Mitchell (2001); Chazan (1998); however, see Harcourt (2017, p. 44ff).

for the common man to keep on good terms with one of the local chieftains or 'big men'. There was no central state apparatus to guarantee law and order and personal security. The chieftains themselves could be friends or enemies, and they were also "friends" with local people of humble means who were dependent on their protection, and who, in return, served them militarily. During changing alliances between chieftains, where open conflict was a constant risk, friendship networks, rather than blood ties, often became an important factor for survival in a harsh world. The different friendships each had a clear public value, even before any 'public' in the modern sense arose. Friendships were thus a life insurance, but also a possible life threat: it could be fatal if you unluckily had chosen the wrong people as friends.

5. Close, and yet so distant

Whereas science and scholarship, as indicated by these brief hints, can subject friendship's ambivalence, non-knowledge and otherness to both empirical and theoretical treatment, fictional literature can more sensibly convey perceptions and experiences of friendship's uncertain beauty, vulnerability and precarious knowledge. If *art* is the exposition in some apprehensive form of a soul moving content with an intrinsic value, then Elena Ferrante's four volume work that came to be known as the Neapolitan Novels — about the generation, development and apparent disappearance of a female friendship — is a superb example of art, and a literary knock-out to Nehamas' thesis that good novels cannot really be about friendship (for introductions, see the volume including Maksimowicz, 2016). The kind of knowledge about reality we get from works of art like this is not fully amenable to theoretical conceptualization, or translatable into declarative knowledge. The

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novel quartette, by the comprehensiveness and wide register of cognitive and emotional modalities enacted by its dynamic forms, allows for a large fine-mesh net to be cast against material that can only be narrated, but never fully explained. In this sense, the novel communicates a precarious knowledge that may be recognized, encountered or simply experienced, without being definable.

It is well-known that Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym that was chosen by the author long before the Neapolitan Novels were created. Apart from its self-protective function, her idea was that the value and life of a work of fiction, once created, can (or should) no longer depend upon its author. Later on, in anonymous interviews and in essays, the author has talked about some of her viewpoints on writing and her sources of inspiration, including critical literary inquiry.

The story about the two friends Lila and Elena spans half a century and is told by Elena Greco, or Lenù as she is also called. In the prologue (or frame story) of the first book, *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena, now in her sixties, receives a call from the son of Lila, who is desperate about his mother's sudden disappearance. Elena is not unfamiliar with Lila's momentary urge to disappear or dissolve herself, but this

time, apparently, she has done it thoroughly, without leaving any trace behind. She even cut herself out of all the family photos. That makes Elena angry: Lila goes too far, as always. She grasps her computer and begins to write about their friendship's story, almost in protest, as if to bring forth Lila again by telling their common story.

Ferrante is an eminent narrator. As a reader, you are drawn into the narrative to such an extent that you forget about the initial Chinese box system or frame story about the lost Lila, and become engrossed in simply following the two girls' lives and development, and what they tell each other.

What does Elena know about Lila? At start, virtually nothing, and Elena's curiosity for her friend is incessantly challenged by Lila's unpredictability. At the beginning of the story, the two girls play with their dolls in the yard and suddenly Lila throws Elena's doll down to a cellar shaft where it disappears, to Elena's horror. Immediately after, Elena does the same to Lila's doll, that is uglier and dirtier, like Lila herself. What you do, so will I do — this seems to be the reasoning that schematically frames their early relationship. Together they descend to the dark basement of the apartment block to search, but they have to give it up, and Lila declares that Don Achille

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took their dolls. He is a mysterious person everybody is afraid of, the loan shark of the neighbourhood, and in the girls' world he has the status of a monster. Lila surprises Elena with her courage and determination and persuades Elena to follow her straight up to his apartment to demand their dolls back. Elena is scared, but Lila takes her hand on their way up, a gesture Elena never forgets. Much later, Don Achille was murdered. The murder remains unsolved, but Lila appears to be very well-informed about the circumstances. Elena does not think that Lila has murdered Don Achille, but Lila turns out to be very prepared, if necessary, to cut the throat of two young men from the neighbourhood's local mafia, the Camorra, who passed them by, harassed the girls and tried to lure them into their car.

Storytelling and script play a central role in all of the Neapolitan Novels. What the two friends tell each other as well as what they omit to tell become important elements of precarious knowledge in the narrative. Often Elena realizes that Lila is far better informed about the micro-political goings-on of the neighbourhood, as well as of the national politics, than she is, and Lila forms her political worldview long before Elena. The young girls dream about writing books together, to live as authors and to become rich. In their basic school, Lila delivers a very well-written story (if we faithfully believe Elena's judgement) called *The Blue Fairy*, a story that comes to play a significant and ambiguous role for Elena. Elena ends up being an author, in no small part because of the inspiration she receives from Lila, and this debt and dependency often concerns her.

Inspiration is indeed a word too innocent; it is as if the voice of Lila every so often speaks directly through Elena. When Lila entrusts her diaries to Elena, it is to keep them safe from the threat of her husband reading them. But the lure of knowing their content is too strong for Elena, who breaks her promise to Lila and reads them,

almost memorizes them, to a point where, in a painful scene, she finally comes to feel just forced to throw them into the river. Elena cannot become herself, as an autonomous person, without distancing herself from Lila, though it be through a kind of symbolic murder. The same sinking feeling is experienced when we witness Lila's reaction, when Elena, now as a professional writer, comes to meet Lila at the terrible food factory she is working at. Elena brings with her *The Blue Fairy* to give it to Lila, almost like a sacred sign of gratitude. By the end of their meeting, they promise to see each other again. Elena exits the factory, but

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looks back to see Lila standing at the bonfire, leafing through the pages of the book. The chapter terminates thus: "Suddenly she threw it on the fire." (*Story of a New Name,* 467).

Ferrante's novels add a challenging complexity to a central insight analysed by Lucia Santaella as Peirce's dialogism – that the action of signs are not merely individual but social, and that this applies as well to the person, whose thoughts are what she is "saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time" (Santaella 2004: 132 [quoting Peirce, CP 5.421]) – reminding us of the complex relation between a self (who is herself dialogic) and her friend as another self. Ferrante's novels can be seen as modeling the very genesis of that dialogic self in the precarious process of finding a balance between dependency and autonomy between the friends. The story about the friendship between the two women extends over a whole lifetime, but with periods of cooling down where they do not meet. Especially in their childhood and youth they were close, but their attachment to each other, though mutual, is asymmetrical, with the narrator Elena as the one who is constantly fascinated by Lila and afraid of not being able to live up to her genius, holding on to her confidentiality, and giving her stimulating opposition. Elena often suffers when Lila's other friends receive her attention. Their relationship casts an oblique light upon the ideals of classic theories of friendship, *a la* Cicero, demanding that "in true friendship the self of each partner is so closely integrated in the self of the other so as to contribute uniquely to its self-realization" (Stern-Gillet & Gurtler, 2014, p. xii). The young women seem closely integrated within each other, but in the beginning, it is more like a punctual merger followed by periods of withdrawal, than it is a balanced mutual attachment between two autonomous persons (cf. Orbach & Eichenbaum (1987) who distinguish between a problematic "merged attachment" and a mature "separated attachment/connected autonomy"). As noted by the critic Abigal Deutsch (2015, p. 164), Elena develops to a high extent her sense of her own self as a person in rebellious response to her ingenious friend Lila.

6. The Ferrante fever's scholarship

Ferrante's story is rich, and its modelling of the special friend relationship between the two women is complex, so it is not surprising to see the emergence of a critical

literature of scholarly commentary and analyses upon it. Psychoanalyst Christine Maksimowicz perceives the special hate/love relationship between

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the two women as an effect of the mother-daughter relationship and the failure of the mother. Especially noteworthy is the depiction of Elena's embittered mother and her insufficient recognition of her daughter – this foundering of their bond that engenders a shame in Elena, a hatred against the mother, and a fear of becoming similar to her – which can be understood as bringing about a certain withholding of intimacy between the two friends (Maksimowicz, 2016, p. 209ff). Lila exerts from the beginning a big attraction on Elena, who is fascinated by her. Though her desiring Lila's attention is not sexual in any narrow sense, it is (especially in her youth) similar to the obsessive limerence of romantic love (Tennov, 1979); a general intensification of feelings, an elatedness when being together, a fear of rejection, an experience of loss of meaning when Lila withdraws, and a tendency to idealize their relationship, such as when Elena narrates:

> "What wonderful conversations. I looked at her white, smooth skin, not a blemish. I looked at her lips, the delicate shape of her ears. Yes, I thought, maybe she's changing, and not only physically but in the way she expresses herself. It seemed to me—articulated in the words of today—that not only did she know how to put things well but she was developing a gift I was already familiar with: more effectively than she had as a child, she took the facts and in a natural way charged them with tension; she intensified reality as she reduced it to words, she injected it with energy. But I also realized, with pleasure, that, as soon as she began to do this, I felt able to do the same, and I tried and it came easily." (*My Brilliant Friend*, p. 129f)

However, such pleasure is capricious and Elena's contentment is interrupted by her 'ugly' thought that Pasquale, who accompanied her to the meeting, had wanted to go there not for the sake of being with her, but to get a chance to see Lila.

Maksimowicz comments upon the special reading experience triggered by the Neapolitan novels. To read them can feel like a radical experience, and critics have wondered why this is so difficult to convey to others after having read the narrative. This may be another form of precarious knowledge. Maksimowicz finds that the strength of Ferrante's use of the narrative frame is that it *shows* what remains veiled in one relation – the ambivalent relationship between the two friends – by means of that which is accessible for the reader about the other relation, the toxic relation

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between mother and daughter that according to Maksimowicz is a decisive background for the character of their friendship.

Other critics, like the psychoanalyst Alison Lee, noticed how Ferrante's recounting of Lila's and Elena's friendship transgresses conventional notions of relationships: The 'pact' between them, rooted in childhood, is not like any common friendship, siblinghood, mother-child relation, or partnership; it is a very special relationship. In Ferrante's exposition that relationship is imbued with a porosity between two selves that becomes a basic condition, even when it is followed by phases of separation and reunion, while "individuation is a constantly receding goal, rather than an accomplishment" (Lee, 2016, p. 495). By trying to know Lila, Elena is also attempting to know herself, and she realizes rather late, as the author Natalie Bakopoulos remarks, that she cannot achieve this fully, and that there is a "precarious balance" in which "becoming, the careening toward knowledge, may be more significant than its actual attainment" (Bakopoulos, 2016, p. 418).

7. The narrativity of friendship

The long story about the friendship between the two women is permeated by distance as well as closeness, and Lila remains an essential part of Elena herself and a precondition for the one she had become, even after having achieved autonomy as a person. The Neapolitan novels thereby offer a uniquely nuanced model of how a precarious and difficult friendship can unfold, a friendship with a complexity that is surpassing the models of this relationship offered by philosophy or the human and social sciences.

Two scholarly contributions are especially worthy to consider, as they each in their own way shed some light on Ferrante's long story. The one is what Ferrante herself, in an interview to *Vanity Fair* (Schappell, 2015), mentioned as a source of inspiration, a book from 1997 by the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. In this interview Ferrante is asked what made her investigate female friendship in a way that radically does away with the idea of it being robust and uncomplicated. She answers,

> "Lena is a complex character, obscure to herself. She takes on the task of keeping Lila in the net of the story even against her friend's will. These actions seem to be motivated by love, but are they really? It has always fascinated me how a story comes to us through the filter of a protagonist whose consciousness is limited, inadequate, shaped by the facts that

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> she herself is recounting, though she doesn't feel that way at all. My books are like that: the narrator must continually deal with situations, people, and events she doesn't control, and which do not allow themselves to be told. I like stories in which the effort to reduce experience to story progressively undermines the confidence of she who is writing, her conviction that the means of expression at her disposal are adequate, and the conventions that at the start made her feel safe." (Ferrante to Schappell)

These reflections hint at how Ferrante twists her inspiration from Cavarero. A salient point in Cavarero's thinking about literature is about what she calls *the narrative self,* and that this self only arrives at itself, or understands itself, when it has a friend who knows that individual so well that he or she would be able to tell the unique story of that person: Not just saying *what* she is, but also *who* she is, as the only one creature of its kind. What distinguishes friendship from a mere acquaintanceship is that the friends see each other as narratable, that is, the friendship opens a horizon wherein "this narratability can be meaningfully translated in the act of a reciprocal narration" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 63).

This point about the narrative self is twisted by Ferrante, and the Neapolitan novels can be read as two interrelated responses to Cavarero. The first one is that even though the friendship between Elena and Lila is a narrative one, there is no clarity. Their knowledge about each other and their doings is precarious, uncertain and incomplete, as reflected in the way they care about each other. At times Elena is even unsure whether they still have a friendship. Ferrante let the elder Elena look back after many years to recount, or write forth, the often chaotic events in their lives into a coherent meaningful story, as if attempting to fulfil what Cavarero terms the narrative desire after an answer to the question "Who am I?". In this way the autobiographical script of Elena gets interwoven with Lila's biography in a movement that constitutes a counterpoint to Lila's wish to disappear, a power against Lila's experience of the dissolution of borders and sense of meaninglessness. The story creates an order, but coincidently the reader obtains a knowledge about this order as being only contingent, and gets a sense that (as said in the quote above) there are "situations, people, and events […] which do not allow themselves to be told".

The second response follows from Ferrante's strikingly convincing portrayal of Lila's complex character. Seen in the light

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of Cavarero's narratology, Lila comes to appear as an almost cynical refutation of Cavarero's assumption that each individual is bestowed with a universal narrative desire after her own story. Elena knows the history of Lila that we follow through the four volumes, and Elena has also a knowledge of Lila's desire to disappear. The story Elena tells works for her as an opposing answer to Lila's wish to vanish, attempting to leave no trace. The dynamical functions of story-telling in their friendship are crucial for its development and surpasses the passive knowledge each friend believes to possess about the other.

Knowledge, as rendered by analytical philosophy as justified true belief, is here shown as precarious and inherently fallible; what we believed to be objectively true was delusional, false beliefs or just half-baked truths, often veiling more uncanny findings. The story that can be told about who a specific individual is will always be subjective and perspectival, and it does not have the same function for the story teller as it has for the one being told about. The dissimilarity between two friends can make one sceptical about the testimonies of the other and about her status as

narrator, as when Elena tells Lila about her happy pregnancy and the birth of her daughter, and Lila answers "Each of us narrates our life as it suits us." (*Those Who Leave,* p. 237). But through Elena's voice, Ferrante is able to depict and make sensible Lila's very refusal of appearing in a story as a fixed character. Ferrante thereby extends Cavarero's model of the narrative friendship by exposing relationships in which the narrative desires of the two friends are different. It is a remarkable achievement for a piece of art to comment upon and improve a theory of art.

Finally, Ferrante's use of the frame-story as a literary tool is an important structure that helps us to understand the novel's ability to act as a model. The frame narrative illustrates how literature can repeat relational structures in its subject field, that is, in this case, the friendship (as shown in another context by Haugland (2012), and by Sharp (1986) for other relations between literary form and friendship): We learn about an incomplete and far from perfect friendship between two women through one's incomplete story about it and about its changes and fading. We have no secure, unmediated direct access to the friend's interior, so narratives and interpretations are uncertain but indispensable processes. We face a certain elegiac aspect of the friendship as a whole, as well as of its story, an aspect Jusdanis (2014, p. 81ff) discusses for other examples.

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This leads us to the other interesting contribution. Two American philosophers, Christopher Moore and Samuel Frederic, drive the narratological screw an extra turn and underline "the story" as the very thing that constitutes friendship (by which they mean "story" in general; they don't refer to Ferrante's work). They mention that our "knowledge of our friend's attitude toward us is incomplete, especially during certain types of separation" (Moore & Frederic, 2017, p. 123). This leads to a fear that is enhanced if, for example, the success of one friend is suspected to be linked to the failure of the other friend. A friendship's often improvised and testing character induces an occasional need to confirm its existence. That happens, they claim, through story-telling, that is, the retrospective interpretation of a continually unfolding sequence of events as meaningful for a life lived together with the friend. The two philosophers' claim is not just that this may be needed to reconstruct a friendship; their rhetorically stronger thesis is that this story-telling as such *constitutes* friendship. It may seem a little contrived when they accordingly declare one of Thomas Bernhard's books to be not only written in a special genre that they call "friendship", but that it really *is* a friendship. Even though the book in question is the author's recollections of his friendship with Paul Wittgenstein, a nephew of Ludwig Wittgenstein, there still seems to be a difference between a story and that something being told about (unless we commit the narratological fallacy of reducing everything to stories, or every object signified to its sign). Nevertheless, without having read Cavarero, Moore and Frederic map out some of the same lines of connection between narrative phenomena and the expressions of friendship that Ferrante's novels unfold in detail.

And maybe even more so, as the art of Ferrante demonstrates how literature can evoke a knowledge which, by its dense and sensuous mediation of experience, far exceeds the forms of knowledge mediated by literary theory, philosophy, anthropology and other academic disciplines. The complexity that a novel may contain is in this case so high that it cannot be entirely captured by any simpler model than itself.

As noted by a critic in a more poetic context, our conventional models for relationships are inadequate to articulate 'strange' relationships of extreme intimacy existing alongside separateness – just the kind of relationships that are so necessary, and yet so troubling (Bertram, 2000, p. 642).

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Conclusion

Apart from summarizing what has already been stated, a conclusion is an inference within an argument or story, based upon foregoing premises, observations, and recounts, from which is drawn a decision about what message to take home from the exposed material. While for scientific and scholarly reasoning we think of a conclusion to be a clear, explicit, rule-bound, and controllable though fallible kind of knowledge, for the narrative inferences of a story (if we think of the end as being in any sense conclusive), we tend to think of this as expressing a more open and precarious form of knowledge, inviting a continuing dialogue about other interpretations. In that regard it is, however, not very different from scientific or philosophical inferences whose meanings also "emerge in the interaction of voices" (Santaella 2004, p. 130).

According to Cavarero, Hanna Arendt condensed the philosophy of Karen Blixen into the statement that "no one has a life worthy of consideration about which one cannot tell a story" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 129). In contrast to the finite life of an individual human being, the story about it can be told again and again, and thereby the story may provide for the desire to transcend finiteness. The story joins together individual events into a unity that is only owned by this unique individual. It is a complex sign of *who* the individual is, not just *what* he or she is. Cavarero emphasizes that the individual cannot see herself clearly, and thus needs another, a friend, to tell her unique history. The narrated friendship is also fully unique, and thus distinguishes itself from those general aspects of this relationship that can be revealed by the different styles of systematic inquiry known from the sciences and the humanities.

Ferrante's Neapolitan novels indirectly comment upon the narratology of Cavarero. Friends not only create their common history and can tell each other's story. This creative narration can appear as a form of love — as friendship indeed is, without implying harmony — and between Elena and Lila, it is more disruptive. There is both love and struggle, and it includes both disappearance of presence and the destruction of script. Many questions remain open, leaving doubts about *who* the friend was. But when the long saga is told, the reader has gained a different

knowledge of friendship, and of differences within a friendship, and may no longer be the same.

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