

'Illuminating the chaos and obscurity': Ferrante and Dostoevsky in Dialogue

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Dr Richard Hibbitt: Hello, and welcome to this event, at the Ilkley Literature Festival, organized together with The Centre for World Literatures, of the University of Leeds. My name is Richard Hibbitt and I will be chairing the event. I'd like to introduce two of my colleagues from the university, Sarah Hudspith, specialist in Russian literature, and Olivia Santovetti, specialist in Italian literature. Who will be talking about two authors, from different periods and also, from different cultures. And what we wanted to do with this event, as you can see, the title Illuminating The Chaos of Obscurity, is to put both Ferrante and Dostoevsky, into dialogue with one another. But for the first part of this event, the prerecorded part, we're going to have a PowerPoint presentation, which you'll be able to follow, as you listen to the discussion. In the second part, we'll be very happy to take questions from the audience and have a further discussion. So without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Sarah, who's going to talk about, the rationale behind this particular dialogue.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Thank you very much, Richard. So I wanted to do this event, because I was introduced to Elena Ferrante by Olivia, as a result of a university module, that we teach on together. And when I read Ferrante's novels, I found that they gripped me and grabbed me, in a way that the work of no other author has done, since the first time I read Dostoevsky and the more I read Ferrante, the more I was really seized by these fantastic novels and by the world that she creates and represents. Not only that, I also found that there were so many themes, that Ferrante explores, that I found were really similar to those that Dostoevsky also treats in his novels. And so I thought that it would be a really good way of understanding this kind of similarity, by having a conversation with Olivia, to discuss these different similarities. This year 2021 is also the 200th anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth. So I thought it would be not only a good way to explore these similarities, but also a good time to consider the lasting impact and legacy of Dostoevsky's novels.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: I'm Olivia Santovetti, and I want to thank Richard for the introduction, and Sarah, for proposing the event. And also, I want to thank the Ilkley Literature Festival, for making it possible. It is great to collaborate again with the festival, I still remember the Ferrante Fever in Leeds, that we organized together in 2016, in our campus. But when Sarah came up with this idea, of a parallel reading of the Dostoevsky and Ferrante, I was struck by how timely and how promising this was going to be. For the many fascinating resonance that Sarah has just highlighted, and we are going to discuss today, but also because I really felt that, the Ferrante Fever, all this addictive, involving reading experience was so similar, I mean, I would say identical, to my experience of reading Dostoevsky, when I was younger. I literally spent one summer devouring one, two after another, I couldn't stop, so a fever. This is what happens with Dostoevsky and with Ferrante, they literally grab the attention of the readers, they pull you right in. They're masters of pulling the readers into the story, and into the mind of the character. Ferrante acknowledges the depth to Dostoevsky in several places, and we might show the first slide. And here in this slide, you see that in My Brilliant

Friend, it is by discussing Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, that Ellen and Nino start courting each other. I'm reading from the slide, she says, "I asked him what he was reading, I told him what I was reading. We talked about our reading". So Dostoevsky's book is a matchmaker, is the intermediary which brings the two characters together over the passion for reading and reading the Dostoevsky. But it also what separates the characters from the others, now see, always in the quote, and see, Marisa was clearly excluded, and she's annoyed, and burst in, shouting, "Stop it who cares about this Dostoevsky, who gives a damn about the Karamazovs." But of course, Ferrante does care about the Karamazovs and this is something on which Sarah can illuminate us.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Yeah, so thank you Olivia. I think it's really interesting, that Ferrante chooses this particular novel, to be that stimulus for the relationship, between Elena and Nino. It's Dostoevsky's last novel, it's also his longest novel and many might say his most sophisticated novel, because what it does is that it reflects upon the nature of telling stories. Many of the characters within *The Brothers Karamazov* tell their own stories and within the telling of the stories, they reflect upon the power of stories and also their competing nature. It's some of these issues that we're going to touch upon, as we go throughout this discussion.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: If I can add this, what Sarah has observed, about *The Brothers Karamazov*. Now I know that about writing, also polyphonic novel is really echo in, by Ferrante's passage from *Frantumaglia*, so we pass to the next slide. *Frantumaglia* is the volume which collects Ferrante's letters, I say, and interviews. And you can see in this passage, that's by speaking of Dostoevsky, Ferrante reveals some of the traits in common between them. Writing as a tension between all their accounts, all stories as polyphony of voices, and finally, this idea of the unfiltered, which Dostoevsky, see the last sentence, is able to pour into his words. Now these unfiltered, this raw material, is also Ferrante's trademark. Novel writing as often be described as a brutally honest, shockingly honest, unnervingly blunt and bringing just some quotes. So pouring the unfiltered with audacity, could well describe her own style. I was just paraphrasing the Ferrante's passage. Let's see the first quote of the next slide. And here you can see Ferrante writes, she says, "When I write, it's as if I were butchering eels. I pay little attention to the unpleasantness of the operation and use the plot, the characters, as a tight net to pull up from the depths of my experience everything that is alive and writhing, including what I myself have driven away, as far as possible, because it seemed unbearable." And this is not only a matter of content, for example, the messiness of female friendship or the taboo of maternal love. So, not only matter of content, but also matter of language and style. See the second quote, "the labor and the pleasure of truthful narration, supplant any other concern, including a concern with formal elegance." And she continues, "I belong to the categories of writers, who throw out the final draft, and keep the rough, keep the tough when this practice ensures, a higher degree of authenticity". And they said the last quote also tells a similar thing. Now, "Beautiful writing doesn't interest me; writing interests me". And this resonates with Dostoevsky, doesn't it Sarah?

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely Olivia. Dostoevsky's narrators are very much have this concern, with trying to write authentically, and how that interacts with the editing

process, that you might expect from a writer. So many of the Dostoevsky's narrators in his novels, are writers of different kinds. Some of them are professional writers, they're novelists or journalists, but whether or not they are professional writers, as you know, as part of their character, the vast majority of them turned to writing. They turned to writing the texts that we as readers are reading, mainly in order to make sense of some kind of tumultuous events, that have happened to them, recently. But as they write, as they put down the events that have happened to them on the page, the pages that we are reading, they also reflect on what they should do with those notes. And as you can see here, we've got two examples, which are very similar. One comes from Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*. This is the comment of a young character, who produces a manuscript that he reads, in the most pretentious way at a social gathering and he says, he reads this out as well. "I can't help feeling that I've just written something terribly stupid, but as I said, I've no time to correct anything; besides, I promise deliberately not to correct a single line in this manuscript, even though I noticed, that I'm contradicting myself every few lines." And then we have something very similar in the novel, *The Adolescent*, where at the end as the narrator, Arkady, reviews what he's just written, there's a similar kind of awareness, that what he's written is not very good, just like in, *The Idiot*, but he's not gonna change it anyway. "I regret a great deal I've written, especially the tone of certain sentences and pages, but I will not cross them out or correct a single word". They don't want to... They feel that authenticity comes from just this unpolished, unedited manuscript, very similar to what Ferrante says, about keeping the rough draft and throwing out the polished version.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: And, if I may add to this, the search for authentic voice by the Dostoevsky narrators as Sarah has pointed out, is also embraced by Ferrante's narrators. And so if we see in the next slide, Elena Greco, the narrator of the Neapolitan novels, wishes she could write the way Lila speaks, I'm reading the quote, "leave abysses, construct bridges, and not finish them, force the reader to establish the flow". So "to leave abysses and to force the reader to establish the flow", means to expose the reader to, and I move on to the second quote, to the "firsthand knowledge of the terror". This can happen only in flashes, only for an instant and for this experience is well-known, Ferrante has invented a word *smarginatura*, and we can move on to the next slide and Goldstein has translated *smarginatura*, with dissolving margins. So the prefix *s* in Italian, is like this in English and Latin, and counter opposes the action of the verb. So *smarginatura* is a sensation of reality losing its margins, collapsing, showing in its brutality, what it really is, and leaving the subject traumatized, exhausted. All women characters in Ferrante's fiction, have experienced in full, the stabilizing effect of the *smarginatura*. This is the thing happening, I'm just now reading some parts of the quote. This is the thing happening to Lila at the New Year's party in Volume One, when the beloved outline of a brother loses consistency, breaks down his outlines and I'm quoting again, "the matter expanded like a magma, showing her, what he was truly made of". Now similar flashes of illumination, also traumatic, of course, are experienced by Dostoevsky's characters, but it is not really the same, is it Sarah?

Dr Sarah Hudspith: No, it's interesting. I would say that there are two kinds of possible analogies in Dostoevsky, for this phenomenon of *smarginatura*. So if we go to the next slide, we'll see an example taken from *The Idiot*. This is to do with the aura, that epileptics sometimes describe experiencing, proceeding one of their seizures. Dostoevsky himself,

suffered from epilepsy and many of the characters that he created in his novels, also suffer from epilepsy. And so, this is the description of *The Idiot's* main character, Prinz Myschkin, experiencing the epileptic aura that captures him, in the moments proceeding a fit. And we have this same kind of idea of a flash, something that happens in an instant that reveals something, about the nature of the human condition. But here, contrary to what Lila experiences, when she sees her brother at this New Year's party, amidst all the fireworks. For her, that's a terrifying experience, but for Myschkin, the epileptic aura is quite positive. We have the same idea of the flash of illumination, so it says, "his brain seemed to catch fire at brief moments and with an extraordinary momentum, his vital forces were strained to the utmost, all at once. His sensation of being alive and his awareness, increased tenfold, at those moments which flashed by like lightning." We can see here that it's a positive sensation. "All his agitation, his doubts and worries, seem composed in a twinkling, culminating in a great calm, full of serene and harmonious joy and hope, full of understanding and the knowledge of the final cause." But if we just move to the next slide, from the same novel, we have what I think is actually a better analogy, to the *smarginatura*. It's not so much in terms of the kind of temporal nature of it coming as a flash, as a moment of illumination, but it is a moment of revelation, of the sort of confrontation of the terror and meaninglessness of existence. This comes at a moment when another character, the young consumptive boy, Hippolite, described seeing the portrait, by Hans Holbein, The Younger, of the dead Christ in the tomb. You can see a little graphic of it there. It's a very unusual painting, very long narrow frame, representing the body in this very narrow space. And he writes about it like this, "Looking at that picture you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly, as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces and swallowed up, impassively and unfeelingly, a great and priceless being..." So there's that real sense of the shock, of the destruction, the dismantling of something that is precious to someone, that we see also in Lila's experience, if I just compare it against the passage that Olivia mentioned a moment ago, this idea of Leila watching her brother disintegrate, something violated the organic structure of her brother. I think there's a much stronger parallel there, of this firsthand knowledge of the terror in Dostoevsky.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Absolutely, and if I mean, this panic perception of the meaningless of the wound, and as you said, this comparison is more appropriate than the previous one, that happened in *The Idiot*. I want to just add that this is the, in essence is the unfiltered, we go back to the unfiltered, the raw material that fiction, good fiction according to Ferrante, should try to account for. And I think it's important to stress that, the quotes in this slide's title, the "Firsthand knowledge of the terror", appears in a passage, we have seen it before, in which Ferrante is discussing, not *smarginatura*, but what is the aim of fiction? Of good fiction. So this reflection on literature, on reading and writing, is constant in Ferrante's works. And perhaps now we can move on to the Neapolitan novels and see, this no reflection on writing, how this is presented in the works of both Dostoevsky and Ferrante. So in the next slide we see, we have title, *The writers at work*. This reflection on writing in the Neapolitan novel, appears most frequently, but not only, in the framing chapters. And in this chapter, we find the narrator pausing, and turning their attention from the narrator, to the act on the vision. From the story, let's say, to the reasons behind her writing the story. And a good example is this passage from the prologue, where Elena, that she, now I'm

quoting, she began to write after, actually, because of, the disappearance of Lila. And by writing Elena brings Lila back, also Elena has her own revenge, telling her own version of the story. So from the very of the Neapolitan novels, we're informed of the symbiotic and competitive nature of these friendship, and the pivotal role played by writing. I think we can move on to the next slide.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: I want to draw sort of similar analogies with Dostoevsky and the idea of how the writer also works, with this sense of, a kind of competitiveness, it's a different kind of competitiveness though. It's more, that Dostoevsky's writer narrators, express a constant anxiety over their success, over their ability to write well, and a constant awareness of what their audience, whether it's their real audience, or their imagined audience, might be thinking of their work. You know, what would a reader say if I write this? What would somebody who is reading this think? What would they think of me? We've got a wonderful example here, from one of Dostoevsky's lesser known novels, *The Insulted and the Injured*, in which the the narrator is a professional novelist, but not a very successful one. He, again here, he reflects upon the pitfalls of too much polishing, too much editing. So he's talking about reading a review of his latest novel, in which the commentator anonymously signed, "The Contributor" says that, "my compositions on the whole "reek of perspiration", that is I pore over them so much in the way of mending and amending that as a result, it all becomes too much of a good thing." So this idea that, you know, the sort of, the anxious and insecure sweats and efforts are of constantly worrying about the finished polishing effect, overall spoils the effect, makes it tright, makes it platitudinous, mockish, however you want to describe it. Dostoevsky in this novel, introduces an interesting concept, which is to do with the idea of, what success really means in writing. The subtitle of this novel is from the notes of an unsuccessful belles lettres. And it's quite interesting, the word that he uses there, because he doesn't use the standard Russian word for writer. He doesn't use that word, which is , he uses this word , which I'm translating kind of as belles lettres, because it's a slightly more kind of, pretentious word. It's sort of, it's got this ironic connotation, which, you know, suggests that someone who puts too much effort into their writing, will be less successful than someone who can write more authentically.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Well, I was also struck by the end of this quote, when he says exactly "too much of a good thing", not this to polish. So, Dostoevsky says this as if in writing, this could be a problem, and it is certainly a problem, if we move on to the next quote. It is certainly a problem for the two Neapolitan friends. Writing fiction says, Elena, here in this quote, needs to give shape and order to the chaos. It means, and I'm quoting, "to paste one fact to another with words," so that, "everything has to seem coherent, even if it's not." So he takes Lila, a brilliant friend dabble to remind her that actually this order, this coherence is a fiction, is a lie. And that underneath this good thing, there is the void. And they, I leave the word to you because, the next part is also a comment on this again, on writing.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Absolutely, yeah. So in Dostoevsky, if we have a look at the next slide, there's this similar idea of trying to produce order, out of chaos and, you know, human life is messy, human life is chaotic, but trying to sort of shape that, is not necessarily a good thing. So again here, we've got an extract from *The Insulted in the Injured*, this is at the start of the novel, where the narrator expresses why he's writing this particular text, the one that we're

reading. He's reflecting on some chaotic and tumultuous, traumatic events that have happened to him and he believes, he starts off believing that, if he writes them down, it will help him. It will make things better. It will make somehow order out of chaos. So he said, "I cannot stop myself constantly recalling the whole of that difficult past year in my life." But he goes on to say, "once they've been written down, they will take on a calmer, more orderly aspect." But then we have the sort of the proviso, which hints towards the fact that Dostoevsky believes, that's not really so. He says, "At least I believe so." but what we see so many times in Dostoevsky, is that actually, that exercise of writing, trying to bring order to the chaos, the writing is a fiction, it's a lie. It's almost impossible to capture the authentic experience, as Arkady in *The Adolescent* says, in a similar kind of note, "Writing it down just makes it cloudy and nightmarish". So it actually, it doesn't work. There's a reason for this, I think in Dostoevsky's mind, if we just move on to the next slide. He was very interested in a quotation from a poet who was very successful, a couple of decades before Dostoevsky became an established writer, and that is Fyodor Tiutchev. Tiutchev wrote a wonderful poem called, *Silentium*, in which there's this wonderful line, that Dostoevsky really sort of latched onto, "A thought once uttered is untrue". It's the quotation at the bottom of the slide there and so what Dostoevsky, I think grasped from this phrase, which he turned almost into a kind of a maxim, was that the words are an artifice, they are artificial. So arts, therefore artistry, should not be too much artistry, artifice. These words are all related, because part of existence is these chaos, this formless terror underneath. The word for it in Russian is , I'm just gonna explain this word to you, and break it down a little bit. So it comes from the words , which in Russian means, form or shape or image. And then the prefix is the Russian word for without, so it's without form or without shape or without image. So literally, it kind of means formlessness, but there is another side to this word in Russian. It's got this also this kind of emotive quality, of kind of disgrace, something that is emotively and kind of morally bad. With Russians are upset about something, if they think it's awful, they will say, , you know, it's disgraceful. So that's interesting as well, that idea of, lacking grace somehow. And Dostoevsky comments on this kind of idea, a number of points, particularly again in *The Idiot*, where we have that painting, that so shocks the character of Hippolite, and who asks this really intriguing question, is it possible to express in an image, something that has no image, something that is , something that is formlessness and disgraceful. So it's really pointing to the idea, that writing, is literally a fiction, it's a lie.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Which is the title of, if we move on to the next slide, the lie of writing, I mean, you see here. What you see here, that is again, this tension between form and formlessness now at stake, also in Ferrante's quote, is the double and ambivalent power of writing, she highlights this. Writing can normalize, polish and reassure, compromising the authenticity of reality, or as Elena, the character in the quote grasps in a flash, you can, and I'm reading the quote, "imitate the disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical, shapeless banality of things." Elena's book, now they are speaking, this is also as with Dostoevsky before, we are seeing she's discussing a review of her book. The review in this case was also given by the friend, by Lila, but Elena's book "was bad". This is the quote, "because it was too well organized," too well written, too polished and the form, not authentic. So this is how fiction becomes a lie, which is not our topic on this slide.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: That's right. Dostoevsky is reminding us several times, in the same way that Ferrante does, that putting things into words, is an artificial exercise. Again, here's yet another example from *The Adolescent*, "Perhaps I've done a bad thing and sitting down and writing. Far, far more remains inside than comes out in the words. Your thoughts, though bad ones, are always much deeper so as long as they're with you, but written down, they're much more silly and dishonest." So how do we capture that authenticity? What is the way of doing that in literature? What is the solution to this conundrum? And this I think has been identified in Dostoevsky, as the concept of polyphony. If we move on to the next slide, we'll see we've got a cover here, of *The Brothers Karamazov* novel, I mentioned earlier. Polyphony was a concept that was identified in Dostoevsky, first of all by, the Russian Cultural Literary Theoretician, Mikhail Bakhtin, in his seminal study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. He identified in Dostoevsky, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses," which he called, "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices". So in other words, there's no kind of overarching authorial omniscience, that stamps a particular point of view or a particular agenda, upon all the other voices going on in the novel. And as I mentioned earlier about this novel, it is a very important one, about different kinds of stories. So for example, as I said, each of the characters has a story to tell, and tells it. That becomes like a kind of inserted narrative, nested within the novel. So Dimitri Karamazov, the eldest brother, he tells the story of his life, he tells the story of how he became involved with his fiance and the financial obligations that he has to her. Ivan Karamazov, the middle brother, he is the one who's beset by the philosophical doubts, about the nature of good and evil. He tells stories about horrendous acts of cruelty to children, and he follows this up with a story that he's created, as a kind of answer, about the grand inquisitor, imagining what would happen, if Christ came back to earth, in the medieval times, at the height of the Spanish Inquisition, what would happen in that circumstance? Alyosha Karamazov, the youngest brother, tells the life of his mentor and his religious guide, Father Zosima. He tells his stories and recounts his teachings and sermons. And then, later on in the novel, when Dimitri is accused of the murder of his father, we have a trial and we have two other kinds of narratives. We have the competing narratives of the prosecution and the defense, each with their own versions of what might or might not have happened, that come into conflict with each other. And Dostoevsky's point here is that, how do we know the truth? How do these words reveal the complexity of this family's relationship, between the brothers and their father, and everything that has gone on leading up to this point? So this is kind of way of overcoming this issue of the lie of writing.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: This is so well said, Sarah, because for Dostoevsky, the way to capture authenticity is polyphony. The same can be said for Ferrante, if we move to the next quote, you can see that just the first sentence, "the "I" is a crowd, with a large quantity of heterogeneous fragments tossing about inside". I won't read the rest of the quote, we have seen it before, but note the last sentence when she speaks, when Ferrante speaks of the secret voices. So I just want to say that the depth to Dostoevsky, as the inventor of the polyphonic novel, is openly a knowledge articulated here in this quote. What we can do next, I think, for Ferrante, is to see how Ferrante recreates a polyphony of voices, in the Neapolitan novels, and this is the next quote. So in next quote, we'll read the passage. "I wish she were here," says Elena, not the narrator, "that's why I'm writing. I want her to erase, add, collaborate in our story". So the narrator is not Elena, it's Elena and Lila. Writing

is a collaboration between the one who writes, to bring order, to make sense of the world, and the one who opens abysses, who points at the magma underneath. So one needs the other, they both need each other, so what matters is that collaboration. And if you see the second quote, in the second quote Ferrante states this clearly, now she says, "together Lenú and Lila, are the ones the best capture me." and ahead, it is "in the movement that characterizes their relationship, in the self-discipline of the one" and "the unruly imagination of the other." So that is why this is a dual narration, in a truly Dostoevsky fashion, I would say. We can now move on to the next slide.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Okay, so what we're going to do now, is to create a different kind of polyphony, by bringing together Elena Ferrante's most recent novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, and Dostoevsky's novel, *The Adolescent*, probably one of his lesser known and less studied novels, but the one which in my opinion, is closest to Ferrante's style. It's probably the most chaotic of Dostoevsky's novels and one with the greatest contrasts in style, linguistically in terms of the narration. And also, I think because the narrators, both first person narrators of these novels are young people, on the threshold of adulthood, it makes for really interesting comparison. So Olivia is gonna kick us off, by just looking at the opening passage, of *The Lying Life of Adults*.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Yes, I will read the opening, because it contains many of the themes, that we have discussed so far, but also many of the themes dear to Ferrante, in the Neapolitan novels. So Naples, the unreliable narrator, the smarginatura, that slipped away, and of course the reflection on writing. So I will read the quote, she says, "Two years before leaving home, my father said to my mother that I was very ugly. The sentence was uttered under his breath, in the apartment that my parents, newly married, had bought at the top of Via San Giacomo dei Capri, in Rione Alto. Everything, the spaces of Naples, the blue light of a frigid February, those words, remain fixed. But I slipped away, and I'm still slipping away, with these lines that are intended to give me a story, while in fact I'm nothing, nothing of my own, nothing that has really begun, or really been brought to completion; only at tangled knot, and nobody, not even the one who at this moment is writing, nobody knows if it contains the right thread for a story, or is merely a snarled confusion of suffering, without redemption." So the last enigmatic lines reformulates, the tension between writing order, the right thread, and writing chaos, the snarled confusion. One thing is certain, I've said that the passage is enigmatic, but one thing is certain, writing cannot bring consolation, can never redeem the suffering, the hidden terror. So let's start the parallel with Dostoevsky, by stating the obvious, something that Sarah has already said, the fact that both texts have adolescent protagonist and the narrator, so the next slide.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Okay, so here on the next slide, we can see quotations from both texts, but, I'll just talk a little bit about *The Adolescent*. This is very much a story about the search for oneself, it's about coming of age and in this novel, it's very much connected with the figure of Arkady's father. Now, Arkady is an illegitimate child, his mother was a young serf girl, married to a much older serf, on the estate of a landowner. The landowner comes, seduces the serf girl and takes her away from her husband, and Arkady is born and other children are born. So Arkady has never really got to know, his biological father. He also hasn't really ever got to know his legal father, so he's merely been brought up in the care of

relatives and so his biological father appears on the scene, invites him to St. Petersburg, to start, finds him a job and wants to get to know him. And so we have this moment of awakening, through getting to know the father. "It's true that the appearance of this man in my life, for an instant in my early childhood, delivered the fateful jolt, from which my entire consciousness began." And he wants to know who his father is, he hears lots of competing rumors about him and he has his own vision of what he wants his father to be. "It turns out, that this man was only an illusion of mine, a daydream leftover from childhood. I had invented him, but in fact he turned out to be someone else, who had fallen far short of my fantasies about him." So it's Arkady's search for his father, but it's also his search for himself, for his actual and I suppose, in a way his metaphorical, illegitimacy. So what would Olivia like to tell us about the narrator of *The Lying Life of Adults*?

Dr Olivia Santovetti: *The Lying Life of Adults* is also clearly, it's a classic coming of age story. We have this Giovanna, rebelling against them parents and becoming an adult or on the verge of becoming an adult. The relationship with the father is very important and in fact, it's maybe one of the novelties of this book, in comparison with other novels by Ferrante, where in fact, the relationship is more with the mother. So this is a novelty of the last book of Ferrante. What I want to highlight now, is that, see the quote, I won't read the whole quote, but I want to point out, that the crisis experienced in adolescence, is here by Ferrante described with words, that are pretty similar to the experience of *smarginatura*. See now the, "something somewhere in my body broke," and then later, "I felt as if I were a container of granules that were imperceptibly leaking out of me, through a tiny crack." I want to move to the next quote, to see why an adolescent put a narrator, really affect the whole story and the whole world of this book. So if we move out to the next quote, we see that what happens here, we have titled this "A constantly shifting point of view", because this is what happens in both texts. Let's say that coming from the Neapolitan novel, we can say that the two analogy of the Neapolitan novels, is here supplanted by a single voice, that of the ugly child, now *The Adolescent* protagonist, Giovanna Trada, but there is a Giovanna before the event, that marked the end of her childhood, and the Giovanna who writes the story afterwards. And the one that has gone through, and come out of the trauma. Now, this constantly changing point of view, is the most intriguing feature of this novel, and I think also, Sarah might agree with *The Adolescent*. So the readers' views, now our views as readers, also become mobile and unsettled, following the undulating motion of Giovanna's mind, when she starts a mission of spying. I'm using a word that she often used, spying on her parents, spying on the world around her. So our perception of the parents, of Vittoria, the aunt, of the innovated events and also of Giovanna herself, changes all the time, oh did our opinion. We keep reassessing, rethinking, what is good and what is bad, right, wrong, beautiful or ugly. So in this tangled knots, the readers like Giovanna, she says in this quote, the readers are losing every old orientation, and the to you Sarah.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Yeah, so it's the same kind of situation in *The Adolescent*, by Dostoevsky. This idea that the point of view is not stable, it's not constant. This is partly obviously, because Arkady is growing up, and in much the same way, as Olivia mentioned, with *The Lying Life of Adults*, there's the case of the Arkady, at the points of the start of the story, compared to the Arkady who has gone through this process, of the events of the novel and finds himself a different young man, at the point at which he sits down to write

the notes about what's happened. And at the same time, as well, within the course of that text, as Arkady comes within different kinds of influences, whether that be his biological father, or his legal father, or his mother, or his various half siblings, or the people that he went to school with, various people of all kinds of social statuses, interact with him and temporarily kind of affect his outlook and his view. All of this sort of comes to the end of the text, where the writing process also adds another layer, into that constant sort of shifting of the point of view. And it's probably one of the least popular of Dostoevsky's novels, because it is the most chaotic, in terms of its narrative. But what Arkady has tried to do, through the writing down of his story, is to, again, to impose a kind of form on it. So, as he says, "I've written these notes, always with the aim of imagining myself, only too clearly as I was at each instant I was describing." But then he talks about the process of writing as having reeducated himself. And again, the word in Russian for educate, is connected with the word for form, , that I mentioned before. To educate is literally, in Russian, to form or to shape someone. By reeducating himself, he has given himself a new shape, he has given himself a new form or a new image and that's very important because this text, because of the family situation that Dostoevsky describes, which he refers to as being an accidental family, you know, the family of the illegitimate children, of the landowner and the serf girl, has come about, not through the kind of normal social practices. It's an example of this messiness of human nature, that the novel is trying to capture. Particularly, when things like, the kind of the traditional nuclear family breaks down. So let's talk now about those particular different influences, that lead to this kind of ambivalence, in the texts between good and evil, if we move on to the next slide. I just want to say a little bit more about those different kinds of influences on Arkady. His biological father, is very much an enigmatic character. Some people talk about him as a debauchee, other people talk about him, as a sort of a selfless philanthropist. Arkady doesn't really know who to believe, he wants to, find out about his father himself. He has various school friends, who have a variety of different philosophical and political views that try to influence him. And all the while Arkady, as a 19 year old, is grappling with his own burgeoning sexuality, his sexual desire, he falls in love with a very beautiful woman and has to decide how to interact with her. And at the same time, he's trying to be himself, to find himself and speak his own unique, independent word. And I think very much the same kind of thing is going on in *The Lying Life of Adults*, isn't it?

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Absolutely, I mean, I think that the opposition, good and evil, is so important in *The Lying Life of Adults*. I think it's important to stress that, this is a light motive also in the Neapolitan novels, starting from the epigraph taken from Goethe's *Faust*, where the is the comrade given to men, to keep them searching, never satisfied, but also to show man that good and evil are inextricably tied together. So in *The Lying Life of Adults*, there's a great attention to good and evil. This is clearly, at least to me, linked to *The Adolescent* perceptive and Giovanna, now the protagonist, the narrator, ponders constantly this opposition, showing how subjective and how porous it is. And here in the quote you have the father, this is the father who says that, "good becomes evil without you realizing it". It's interesting to know that he was trying to explain, his own reasons, for giving the bracelet, to his lover instead of the daughter. Now the opposition good and bad at the beginning, shapes even the topography of the city. If we can move on to the next slide. Even you can read the city with this opposition. So the city, Naples, everything is socially linguistically stratified, considered in this particular novel. Consider the dividedness of the

family, the two Naples, up and down Vomero, where the Neapolitan middle class lives, speak polite Italian and Pascone, the bleak industrial neighborhood where dialogue is spoken. There are even two sets of characters, for the two parts of the city. And I think it's interesting to know that, whereas in the Neapolitan novels, Elena, the narrator is the social climber, who leaves the neighborhood and Naples, finally, yeah. In *The Lying Life of Adults*, Giovanna, the protagonist, does the opposite, hers is a journey, you see the quote, "into the depths of the depths of Naples", into the forbidden dialect. And the guide is this Vittoria, the repudiated aunt, the childhood bogeyman, as she's also described in the novel, whose face and I'm quoting, because it's particularly important 'cause she says, "The face seems so vividly insolent that it was very ugly, and very beautiful at the same time" Now, to you Sarah.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Yeah so, in *The Adolescent*, Dostoevsky's novel, the portrayal of St. Petersburg, I think, is the most contrasting that we see in all of Dostoevsky's novels, set in St. Petersburg. So many of them have St. Petersburg as a setting, but whereas for example, in *Crime and Punishment*, we tend to see only the lower social circles of St. Petersburg and in *The Idiot*, we see mainly the high society of St. Petersburg. In *The Adolescent*, we see both of them, we see them intermingled. And again, this is to do with this kind of ambiguity, this kind of swinging and shifting, between the polarities of good and evil. So in *The Adolescent*, Arkady is first of all, brought to St. Petersburg to work as a kind of secretary, for an elderly prince, and so he's introduced into the high society of St. Petersburg, the company of princes, but then there are the kinds of Acima, outside of St. Petersburg, where some of his old school friends, with their more radical political views, are now frequenting drinking dens, gambling dens and places where people indulge in all kinds of vice and Arkady is the go-between, just as Giovanna is the go-between, in the different areas of Naples, and the go-between between the warring elements of the family. So Arkady is the go-between, between the different sections of St. Petersburg and the competing rivals for the financial and the emotional attention of different prominent characters. Just as in *The Lying Life of Adults*, there is this symbolic objects, the bracelet, that Giovanna's aunt, says should have been given to her and why wasn't it, and all the story behind that, of the intricate problematic relationships between those families. So, in *The Adolescent*, we have document written by this beautiful woman, she's a young widow, and she wrote this, at a time when she thought her father might be starting to suffer from dementia. And she wrote this letter to a solicitor asking, could he be placed perhaps under court supervision and then the father recovers from himself, and she doesn't want him to discover that she wrote this letter, because if he found out that she had those doubts about him, he might disinherit her. So there's this compromising document, that falls into Arkady's hands and different people want to use it as a tool, to manipulate both him and the the young widow. And he goes between the different societies, holding this symbolic objects, that can influence the relationships between the characters, in a very similar way, as happens in *The Lying Life of Adults*. But what this also points to, I think, is the sense of the depths of society, and not just the, in terms of the social aspect, in terms of the poorer areas of society, but also the depths in terms of the morality, which Dostoevsky referred to as the undergrounds. We move on to the next slide, I just want to develop this idea of the underground, a little bit. One of Dostoevsky's earlier works, *Notes from Underground*, which is often considered to be, not just an interesting work of fiction, but a sort of important philosophical essay as well, in

which he really does try to grasp this idea of almost existential anxiety, of the human condition, which for Dostoevsky, really characterizes this concept of the underground, those lower depths of the human psyche, of the human soul. But for Dostoevsky, this underground aspect, is what is most important. It links back to everything that we've been saying, about the firsthand knowledge of the terror, about revealing those moments, where we confront the meaninglessness of existence and where somehow, something authentic comes out of that, which is very difficult to represent in words, but that can be done through collaboration, through polyphony, through a multitude of voices, where sort of overlapping the sense of the authenticity, will eventually emerge. Here is what Dostoevsky said himself, about this concept of the underground, responding in the way that he did. So conscious about the voice of critics, responding to what critics tended to reprimand him about in his writing, he says, "I alone have revealed the tragedy of the underground, consisting in suffering, self-castigation, awareness of the highest and the inability to attain it, and chiefly, in the firm conviction of these unfortunate people that everyone is like this, but there's seemingly no point in trying to improve! What could support those trying to improve themselves? Rewards, faith? There are no rewards from anyone, no faith in anyone. Just one step from here, and you find the most extreme debauchery and crime, murder. Underground, underground, poet of the underground. The feuilletonists repeat this about me, as if it were something derogatory, fools! This is my glory, for therein lies the truth." And I think it's very much like, what Ferrante is trying to do, isn't it Olivia? In this idea of the depths of experience.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Absolutely, but first, what a fantastic quotation, from Dostoevsky, I was blown away. I mean, it's a good quotation, and yes, I agree. Ferrante too wants to caption the underground and now let's remember you see the quote there, let's remember that writing is pulling up what is under, the unfiltered element, unbearable, she calls it. Pulling it up, from the depths of experience indeed. Since we are at the end, I launch myself into a fanciful last part, and suggest that, what Ferrante has done, what Ferrante is doing, is transform what Dostoevsky calls here, in this passage, tragedy of the underground, into the tragedy of a 21st Century women, under the patriarchy. Yes, because Ferrante says in one of her interviews, that we are still in the thick of the battle. So the battle, she says in the passage in the next slide, the last slide is, and I'm quoting, "with the raw material of our experience as women", not only because all her female characters, experience the underground and because of that, they have survivors and not victims, but also because she turns, Ferrante turns writing into militant activity. The dissatisfaction, anxiety, Sarah said many interesting things, on the anxiety of the Dostoevsky's narrators and the similar anxiety pervades the last volume of the Neapolitan novels. So the dissatisfaction the narrators of Ferrante and Dostoevsky experience as writers, in their constant battle with the raw material, to keep the authenticity, in spite of the order, the embellishment, the simplification of fiction, this dissatisfaction acquires here a gender dimension, becomes a systematic dissatisfaction, you see in the quote. That of a woman writer, battling with the "male literary tradition". I'm just taking bits and pieces from the quote, comparing myself to giants. The woman writer not only must know, the tradition thoroughly, and she does, and Ferrante's homage and the use of Dostoevsky is a brilliant example. So the woman writer must not only know, the traditional thoroughly, but she also needs to learn to reuse it, bend

it as needed, in order to create what she says at the very end of the quote, "a literally genealogy of our own".

Dr Richard Hibbitt: And I think I'm gonna have to interrupt you there and thank you both, 'cause we're almost out of time for the first hour, but thank you very much, both Sarah and Olivia, for that fascinating discussion. And we could just stop this pre-recorded bit in a moment and then move on to questions, but I'm just gonna just make a few points as a bridge to let Sarah and Olivia get their breath back as well, before we move into any questions from the audience. I think what's particularly interesting, about what you've done by juxtaposing these two writers in front of us, is almost putting them into present tense, for us at the moment. So we see these first person narrators, the writers themselves, there's a dialogue in front of us and how we see these people going through similar experiences and attempting to make sense of them. And I'm just going to mention a few things, that we might want to think about, for the discussion. The first thing is the notion of influence, of course, we've seen how Ferrante specifically influenced by Dostoevsky, but we can also put that, turn it on its head, the French critic Pierre Bayard, wrote a provocative book a while ago called, *Plagiarism by Anticipation*. And it's essence is not just a one directional form of influence. The idea is, to what extent is Dostoevsky actually plagiarizing Ferrante? How is Dostoevsky in fact anticipating, what Ferrante is going to be doing, that several centuries down the line. I also like to come back to that last point about gender here, what's particularly interesting how you ended on Ferrante's lesson from Dostoevsky, and a sense of what has been really like for women writers. To what extent again we might be able to challenge that and say, can we go beyond questions of gender? Remember just thinking about consciousness, in terms of making sense of the experience. Of course, this experience always has to be contextualized but is there a way in which we can see, Dostoevsky and Ferrante merging, at a point, perhaps for gender. I like also about the notions of belief, the importance of belief to Dostoevsky. What does belief mean for Ferrante? And the final question perhaps is to do with style, it's very interesting, Sarah how you showed, of course, the polyphony in Dostoevsky's novel and how Olivia took that point up, thinking about these different voices, within the first person, within the writer. And again, this loops back to this question of gender, but also how the two voices within the self, are actually conveyed in the novels, through the two girls themselves, so we're going to counter point to one particular voice. And the final thing I think is about a question about style. Because what's interesting of bringing these two particular writers together, you've got a 19th century novelist and here we have a contemporary novelist, and we have all his modernist literature in between, of what role that sense plays in terms of experimentation, in terms of experimenting with syntax, for example, what it is about Ferrante going back to Dostoevsky, in this particular example, rather than going back say to Bruce, or to Joyce or to Will, or the other writers. So perhaps those are some of the things that we can think about, but of course we welcome other questions from the audience. And I think it's time for us to stop now, so thanks very much for listening so far.

Dr Sarah Hudspith: Thank you.

Dr Olivia Santovetti: Thank you.