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## 'NOTHING is not Really Happening': on Anna Mendelssohn's Prison Writing

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For Alma

Mendelssohn's prison notebooks give only a fragmented picture of prison routine. Transcriptions of meeting minutes show concerns about divisions of labour, wages,<sup>1</sup> diet improvement and basic commodities such as deodorant and disinfectant, preoccupations around TV and musical entertainment, the repeated breaking and disappearance of objects, disagreements and harassment among the incarcerated women and an apparently common reluctance to find meaning in or to participate in reproductive labour (such as serving food and cleaning) and communal activities.

There is much to be said about the many morphings her diary entries undergo, and her notebooks deserve more careful consideration than I will be able to provide here. But I do want to draw out two underlying threads at play in the extract quoted below which remain relevant themes in her later poetry. The first thread is the reversal of the death/life dichotomy, the second a decomposition of the sentenced subject through the development of techniques of non-surveillance and fluidity of the self. I read both as a form of resistant imagination writing itself against the reality of her incarceration.

In an entry dated 7 February 1974, Mendelssohn writes the following in her notebook:

None of this is isolate. There is never a break (aversion of glance). Must try to communicate / give the essence – for I fear that it will not be in my lifetime. Yet I do wonder how many know it without reservation, I can say, nothing has not fitted the possibility.

The Urge is strong. The surrender is easy, it happens all the time. I hear so many words from lips which are not helping & the conditions are impossible. But mind-constructed theories of any form, are waverings away from – not towards.

There is so much that is disagreeable to me, & I am sick (of the disagreeable) for it isn't me, it isn't me – that the theories or the self-proclaimed knowledge/ awareness disagree with, it isn't for me – I am nothing more than a shell, or a forest, or a rainy day, or the unspeakable silence of the ocean tide.

To convince is a method of salesmanship. Persuasion. The extra-curricular amassing of backed-up fodder, laid waste – to stagnate in a sea of selection, in a sea of bubbles, strokeable – touch it – POP

stop peddling.

It is not interesting to talk about. GAS. GAS. GAS.

It is not so easy that it can be BROUGHT to fruition.

Unconscious.

never gone never started never sought never gained.

/ magic Illusion

(This is not really happening  
- NOTHING is not really happening).

‘I don’t BELIEVE it’           GOOD  
 ‘it will never be the same again.’   GOOD  
 We don’t know what we’ve missed. GREAT  
 NOW – IT WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.<sup>2</sup>

The urge to impart the ‘essence’, something known without reservation, implies at the same time a continuity out of which the particular cannot be extracted (‘None of this is isolate. There is never a break..’). The affirmation of this inseparability is also inherently a refusal of an ongoing interpellation. It simultaneously addresses the knowledge that is constitutive of her sentencing, materialised in the prison walls, and the categorising mechanisms of discursive dogmatism calling itself ‘revolutionary’, thinking it can ‘convince’ the world to change through argument while mirroring in its discourse the categorising of the state, precisely insofar as it constitutes a non-life, is a ‘wavering away from – not towards’. At this border between two attempts at snatching, Mendelssohn’s writing itself becomes liquid matter:

I am nothing more than a shell, or a forest, or a rainy day, or the unspeakable silence of the ocean tide.

This sentence presents us not with a single image of the multiple in nature but rather an accumulation of images (and clichéd at that), and thus takes on an almost ironic tone that prevents the metaphor from standing in for the idea of the subject. This decomposition is contrasted in the following with the ‘amassing of backed-up fodder’ into semblances (‘bubbles’) of reality. They do not stand the test of touch. This in turn creates an oppositional reality principle that is compounded through both movement and contact, and these two principles in turn are the ingredients of the following spell:

/ magic Illusion  
 (This is not really happening  
 NOTHING is not really happening)

‘This’, which is substituted in the subsequent line with ‘nothing’, negates the existence of the situation – which at the same time brings another meaning into being: everything really is happening. Thus, the negative space that Anna Mendelssohn/ Grace Lake opens up is actually one of absolute possibility – I argue that this is what is referred to when she talks about knowledge ‘without reservation’, which would provide nourishment for a resistant imaginary. This in turn is connected to a different conception of justice.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> C.f. Eleanor Careless, 'Art Takes All My Time: Work in the Poetry and Prison Writing of Anna Mendelssohn', in *Poetry and Work: Work in Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Walton and Ed Luker (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2019), p. 178.
- <sup>2</sup> Prison notebook, 7 February 1974, SxMs109/2/A/3, Anna Mendelssohn Archive (1928–2013), University of Sussex Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton, UK.

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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