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## ARTICLE

# 'I Don't Talk to the Police Except Never': Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life Writing

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This article begins with a comparative reading of work by Tom Raworth and Anna Mendelssohn. It demonstrates how both poets construct a surface of language that troubles the relationship between reader and poet through perpetual 'turns' which accumulate forms of coherence not reducible to linear arguments or narratives, and also asks the reader to constantly register what forces they apply in order to render meaning in, and through, this surface. In this way, both Raworth and Mendelssohn occupy a defensive position in relation to the reader, and cultivate poetry which 'hovers on the edge of meaning'. Building on this account of a mode of evasiveness which both poets share, grounded in existing Raworth scholarship, the article goes on to focus specifically on Mendelssohn's work. Although both poets take up and problematise life writing, Mendelssohn's is distinct in its relationship to confession, figuring the reader as always potentially an agent of juridical and carceral state power. The article argues that it is this tendency in Mendelssohn's work which warrants its description as 'anti-confessional life writing.'

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**Keywords:** British Poetry Revival; Tom Raworth; Anna Mendelssohn; life writing; confessional

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I

The poet Anna Mendelssohn, born in Stockport to a left-wing, Jewish family as Anne Mendleson in 1948, undertook most of her writing between the late 1980s and her death in 2009. Mendelssohn was well-established among a coterie of experimental poets based in East Anglia, but her published output was very small: three pamphlets under the pseudonym Grace Lake, which were put out by Equipage in the 1990s, and

one perfect-bound book, *Implacable Art*, published by Salt in 2000.<sup>1</sup> To date, there has been limited critical work done on Mendelssohn's oeuvre.

When Mendelssohn died, obituaries appeared not only in the mainstream press – Peter Riley wrote the piece that appeared in *The Guardian's* 'Other Lives' on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009 – but across left-wing political blogs.<sup>2</sup> Whilst this article is not interested in probing Mendelssohn's biography, it is necessary to introduce her not only as a poet, but as a political figure. Mendelssohn was one of the Stoke Newington Eight, convicted of conspiracy to cause explosions in 1972. Although Mendelssohn was certainly involved with the Angry Brigade, who were responsible for a bombing campaign that targeted conservative politicians, banks and the 1970 Miss World pageant, she pleaded not guilty, and has always denied any responsibility for the bombings. Riley notes how her 'impassioned and eloquent self-defence at the Old Bailey is still remembered with pride by her then comrades.'<sup>3</sup>

This article aims, first of all, to catalyse academic conversation about Mendelssohn, initially by situating *Implacable Art* in relation to some work by her contemporary Tom Raworth. Building on such comparisons, it also aims to establish a distinctive claim about the collection. Both Mendelssohn's time in jail, and the fact that she defended herself at trial – revealing flaws and outright lies in the case brought against her – form necessary context to this claim, that such poetry constitutes a kind of *anti-confessional* life writing. By this term, I mean that while it asks the reader to share aspects of the poet's experience, it frequently identifies its reader, in that reader's attempts to make sense of the poetry's many difficulties, with state mechanisms of surveillance and enclosure. In this way, it seeks to manifest the productive violence of juridical interrogation and confession.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Anna Mendelssohn archive opened at the University of Sussex in 2015, collected and overseen by Sara Crangle, there has been a renewed interest in Mendelssohn's work, including a symposium hosted jointly between the Centre for Modernist Studies at Sussex and Birkbeck's Contemporary Poetics Research Centre.<sup>5</sup> With over 770 notebooks and sketchbooks in the Sussex archive, there is a prolific body of work to be explored. It is likely, then, that more work based on the archives and Mendelssohn's earlier publications should soon be forthcoming.

## II

Its grammar is often unparsable. Punctuation, other than a few questions and quotation marks, is spotty to non-existent. The verses are interrupted by curious doodle-drawings. There is no clear sequence of events, no consistent speaking voice, and no sustained cumulative argument.<sup>6</sup>

Here Brian M. Reed is describing Tom Raworth's 1983 poem 'West Wind'. The same set of privatives – scanty punctuation, no clear sequence of events, no consistent speaking voice, no sustained cumulative arguments – might equally well characterise many poems in Mendelssohn's *Implacable Art*. Indeed, Mendelssohn's work even shares the transmedial character of Raworth's, with Mendelssohn's 'doodle-drawings' – usually non-figurative or crypto-figurative, fairly abstract, ink drawings – interspersed among both typed and hand-written poems. Clearly, Reed's account could be applied to a great deal of poetry of the British Poetry Revival and its antecedents. I want to argue further, however, that the work of both poets shares a mode of secrecy or evasiveness which is related to, but goes further than, these features Reed picks out.

In much of Raworth's work, and some of Mendelssohn's, the lyric turn – the motion and countermotion of feeling and argumentation, which for a Petrarchan sonnet might constitute its dramatic centre, its volta – is multiplied, doing away with the expectation of revelation after the turn. The reader encounters the lyric voice in the perpetual moment of turning away from its own implied closure, and of starting to reconstitute horizons of possible expression. Consider the opening lines of Mendelssohn's 'Staged whispers':

a beginning weighed running startled experience  
 dragged from the gynaecium mouthed by pretence  
 irregular simulacrum in master hands  
 moulding little women in crotchety barns  
 indirectly revolution meant trust in validity  
 not weak & easily influenced word perfect lads

and sisters heavily practising jesuitry for subtlety's sake  
accumulating pats on the back from big brothers<sup>7</sup>

There are plenty of ingredients here for a committed reader to attempt to assemble. A gynaecium is a portion of an Ancient Greek household, often an innermost apartment, reserved for women. It suggests a relatively safe, secluded, feminized space, with a semipermeable boundary, through which women come and go, but not men. But in Mendelssohn's poem, the border between gynaecium and elsewhere is not so well-protected as purported. Rather, it is a mere 'pretence', forming the mouth of an artificial womb. There is also, therefore, a sense of an artificial birth, and of being violently 'dragged' from this sanctuary out into a masculine public space of 'master hands/moulding little women'. This more public space may be the workplace, or perhaps the 'crotchety barns' of revolutionary political organising. Mendelssohn draws another treacherous boundary within the pathological hendiadys of 'lads/and sisters', where a line break links two halves that don't quite fit together: 'lads [and lasses]' and '[brothers and] sisters'. This gendered fault-line may have something to do with the passage's chief accusation – that the 'lads/and sisters' are 'heavily practising jesuitry for subtlety's sake' – and it certainly places the people it describes in an intimate relationship with the 'big brothers', whose presence strongly connotes state surveillance, and whose 'accumulating pats on the back' suggest the disciplinary statecraft of 'master hands/moulding'. There could be a connection here, too, between those controlling big brothers and the church: an idea that might inform the discussion of sin, guilt and confession which appears later in this article.

Nevertheless, despite the suggestion of some cohesive complaint or invective, underpinned by a specific personal history of some kind, these lines refuse to interlock into a system of relatively closed, mutually reinforcing meanings. The poem does not relay a political narrative or stage a political argument, so much as it accumulates, turn by turn, a political orientation. The language all twists through the poet herself, so that whilst it is difficult to identify specific political claims that are not colourable or deniable, and whilst some of the language may be altogether incommunicative, the salient points recur often enough to dictate an overall political tendency for the

poem. Given this accretive approach to meaning-making, the poem's unifying form may be no more than the coexistence of every element of the verse in the speaker's voice and, perhaps also, in the poet's mind.

To understand how this twisting, associative, accumulating method can yield a kind of life writing, it is useful to compare a few lines from Raworth's 'West Wind'. Reed notes how 'fleeting leftist political commentary' enters 'West Wind' again and again.<sup>8,9</sup> He also cites an account of a period Raworth's mother spent in hospital, which joins the personal and political by mounting a critique of the disintegration of the NHS under Thatcher's government. As with Mendelssohn's poem, 'West Wind' is difficult to excerpt from; its passages are internally porous, bleeding from one to the next. In the following fragment, Raworth's poem transitions from the observation of a moth to a remark about somebody's driving:

a moth  
 tapping inside a paper shade  
*quand même*  
 you drove splendidly  
 a long stretch  
 at the sorting centre<sup>10</sup>

The thought turns on '*quand même*': that versatile French expression inadequately translated into English as 'even so'. Despite the insistence on linkage, there is no discoverable interface between the distinct parts of this quotation – the driving and the moth, the English and the French – except that they occur simultaneously and sequentially in the poem. Simon Perril writes of Raworth's poem 'Into the Wild Blue Yonder' that 'the majority of Raworth's poem is generated by the magnetic attraction of words to each other through the associations of memory',<sup>11</sup> and that's exactly what we see here. The connections between the different elements of the poem are structured by poetic turns. Between the turning nature of the expressed thought, and the 'long, skinny' shape of the poems, a winding, twisting sense emerges.<sup>12</sup> The thought turns from one idea to the next, its angles controlled via an apparatus that is invisible to us: it exists in the poet's lived experience.

Or perhaps not completely invisible, insofar as 'West Wind' is also a conspicuously reflexive work. So it is not quite right to say that the lived experience that animates and integrates the poem is conspicuous via its absence. Instead, the poet's mind is withdrawn enough that it creates a bare stage, on which there play out different proposals for how to fit the poem together. As Perril notes, 'West Wind' appears particularly interested in the visual field as a metaphor for its own operations. The poem includes, for instance, a metaphor for the poem as a living weave, with individual 'threads' figured as blood vessels. These move, and flow, and braid together to form a living whole. In the following lines, we are directed toward our own reading practices, as we try to keep track of the poem's twisting. The 'finer line' suggests the long, skinny poem itself, where 'altered shapes' are glimpsed in the moment they topple away. There is an exploration of seeing and of being seen, and of what the 'weaker eye/records', teasing us with a connection between sight and sound:

the weaker eye  
 records unseen  
 different angles  
 altered shapes  
 never quite balanced  
 on a finer line  
 let muscle heart  
 push blood threads further  
 into the blanket's weave  
 (Raworth, 'West Wind' 2003, ll. 97–105)

The twisting, associating work of the poem is identified as a 'weave', and the flow is given a source: a pumping heart, which is tangling 'blood' through the fibre of the poem. Individual thoughts or threads of the poem simultaneously turn and flow, giving that sense of twisting; they also combine to make a whole, a 'blanket' surface, in which the individual strands are invisible. Such a surface tempts its readers to discern linear narratives and arguments (to spend a 'long stretch' in the 'sorting

centre', perhaps). These are aspirations which the poem both generates and fruitfully frustrates.

The 'altered shapes' also make up the non-canonical history of a world perceived from the 'different angles' of the non-dominant eye. The content that the 'weaker eye' *records* without quite *seeing* – the data incorporated into the visual field only insofar as it supports the data of the dominant eye – allegorises a hidden, unofficial social history of questionable intelligibility. The crux, however, is the last three lines. In these lines, whatever it is that 'the weaker eye/records unseen' is permitted to possess its own structure and coherence, albeit of an ambiguous kind, integrated and organismic but still not necessarily socially intelligible. Once again, it is the poet's lived experience that allows one thought to turn to the next, and that experience is figured as above all bodily in nature.

Elsewhere, 'West Wind' asks 'for whom/does thought/translate' – questioning the recoverability or the replicability of the poet's integrating cognition by the reader.<sup>13</sup> The evasions of these endlessly twisting surfaces are often more guarded than they are playful. This defensiveness perhaps distinguishes Mendelssohn's and Raworth's poetry from other superficially similar avantgarde life writing of the period. Mendelssohn's and Raworth's poetry does not necessarily celebrate the creative energies of the reader, a tendency which Perril draws out as follows:

The now characteristic form of the long poems, established in the seventies, deploys the linebreak as a device that holds each line in momentary suspension between continuity and discontinuity. It dramatizes the need for readerly 'animation' to establish the nature of the lines' relationship, *even as it makes the reader aware of the coercive force he or she exerts in doing so.*<sup>14</sup>

Without access to the poet's lived experience, through which many of these associations were forged, the reader can never fully occupy the poet's sense of why and how these materials are related. Perril astutely observes the 'coercive force' that the reader must exert to extend pockets of sense into a unified whole. Tom Orange, looking at Raworth's poem *Ace*, gives an ingenious reading of the syllables 'ace' and

'art', which amount to making it 'a love poem'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, as Orange also cautions, Raworth's reader is only ever invited to 'hover on the edge of meaning'.

The line 'hover on the edge of meaning' is a quotation from 'Letters from Yaddo', excerpted from a letter Raworth's father wrote to him. Perril, Orange and Marjorie Perloff all borrow it as a description of the kind of sense made by Raworth's longer poems.<sup>16</sup> This hovering, which might also be considered as a flickering between variant meanings, is exemplified in 'Lie Still Lie Still'. This is the earliest of Raworth's poems considered here, from the 1971 collection *Moving*. This poem also provides a good point of comparison with Mendelssohn, as the presence of the poet in the verse, and its gesture towards life writing, is again to the fore here. Raworth writes:

is seeing how language works  
 what it means the face of a wolf  
 glares back through the glass<sup>17</sup>

The first line may be taken as a complete question, and according to Perril, 'seeing' is indeed 'how language works' in Raworth's poetry. In connecting 'Letters from Yaddo' to Christopher Dewdney's work on the way human vision functions, Perril notes that jump-cuts and differences are important in Raworth's writing, as the poet becomes interested in 'recording the physiological restlessness of sight and registering the information processing that "fashion[s]" the world around us.'<sup>18</sup> The visual process articulated here is the *saccade*, or "jerk": physiologically, when we read, our eyes jump around the page, ultimately reconstituting a perception of the whole, which is neurologically transformed into a perception of continuity and legibility. The reader is actively engaged in establishing the shape and meaning of the poem, at a neurological as well as analytic level. The experience of time, of course, is essential to this: the understanding of a life as a linear narrative, and of reading a poem down a line, organises both the poetry we read and the phenomena we encounter as following a linear narrative flow that is intrinsic to the reader or experiencer, but not to the phenomena themselves. The gaze jerks around but the experience is broadly understood as one smooth narrative. Similarly, the poem jerks around but

is accumulated both into the narrative shape (literally) of the form, and the narrative experience of the reader.

While such passages don't quite exemplify the anti-confessional mode we find in Mendelssohn, there *is* a tension with life writing here: an expression of perception and experience, that is antagonised by the concept of being watched, interpreted and read. The intervention of 'glass' between reader and poet is central to this anxiety. Perril proposes that the surface of Raworth's poetry may coalesce in much the same way the visual field does. Suggestive as this may be, the more striking fact is the absence of any overall anchoring context, such as an immersive narrative or a stable speaking subject, thus making the movement of the language itself into the primary matter of the poetry. The pane of glass in this quotation lets through some things – light, for instance – and keeps out others. So although it may suggest clear, two-way communication, this surface also becomes barrier, one which is both fragile and dangerous, and one which can restrain and silence.

Then there's the wolf. Part of how 'language works', especially in poetry, means that 'a wolf/glares back through the glass'. This 'wolf' can be read a number of different ways. The poet may be seeing their own reflection, in a dark window or a fairytale looking-glass, distorted into the face of a wolf: the image in the poem is distinct from the reality of the cohering intellect. Secondly, though, in a moment more strongly reminiscent of Mendelssohn's work, wolf and *reader* may become one: the presence on the other side of the glass, the presence that 'glares'. There is a light pun, here, in the 'glare' on the glass, which according to John Wilkinson, 'for the single but imbued intelligence' acts to flag up 'his or her circumferential world': the contingent conditions of possible experience.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the glass surface must be reinforced protective glass: the poem is a barrier between the poet and the reader which stops the poet from being consumed.

In terms suggested by Mendelssohn's work, such a barrier might allow the artist to observe the reader, while protecting the poet from being incarcerated by them. Like Raworth, Mendelssohn cultivates twisting surfaces that both conceal and reveal. Her work accomplishes its solidity in a cumulative, non-linear fashion, and the

connection between precise moments must often be intuited by a sense of sustained emotion, or must be sensed – perhaps seen or heard, or even propriocepted – rather than revealed by processes of reasoning, processes which fail to register 'the space within which spoken words/are written', and tend to tip over into coercion.<sup>20</sup>

We can further explore this notion of the poem as a somatically integrated object, whose coherence might just be discovered non-coercively, so long as its sensuous character is allowed to be fully cognitively expressive, through Mendelssohn's 'Pladd. (you who say either)'. This poem is probably, of all those collected in *Implacable Art*, closest formally to Raworth's long poems (perhaps alongside 'And Waterloo Westminster'). 'Pladd. (you who say either)' is split into three more or less even parts, each printed on its own page. Although the lines are quite long, the poem is printed in columns. The centre of focus is mobile, never resting on one point of attention. The first section sees a figure in the countryside 'pladverbially plodding' along as a sheen of rhymed and assonated nonsense words carry the verse forward:

nutmeg. primus stove. raised eyebrows.  
 work sharing. retreat into the forest.  
 the silver conifers. the crumbs, chums.  
 biceps & musical hairs. plaesthetics.  
 planna vanna. plin plor plon pladverbially  
 plodding along with a net in sturdy boots...<sup>21</sup>

Disconnected aspects of the same experience seem to show up from time to time: for instance, 'primus stove [...] retreat into the forest./the silver conifers' requires a minimum of imaginative reconstruction to bring together the experience of a hike, or a camping holiday. Mendelssohn laces the poem with 'the associations of memory': puns, word-games, associations, as well as the kind of noise-patterning common in half-conscious thought: 'plaesthetics./planna vanna./plin plor plon pladverbially/plodding'. This might be an example of the 'magnetic' quality of memory that Perril identifies in Raworth: one sound is like another, and it is a patterning of memory that brings them together.

Puns and echoes may fill a poem with movement and transformation, insofar as one pattern of sound can contain very different concepts, as well as the implied energy of going from one concept to the other. In a phrase like 'plin plor planna pladverbially', however, the vague shape of punning is preserved, but the sound association between one moment and the next feels forced. One of these things reminds us of the other only because of words that the poet makes up. The poet is a virtuoso cohering force, asserting that there is an association between two moments, and then engineering a sound structure to take us along from one to the next: once again, the reader hovers on the edge of meaning, and the poet just within.

This movement of sound, and movement of the butterfly catcher or fisher, or other person 'plodding along with a net in sturdy boots', is picked up in the poem's second section, as 'the rhine in spine laced down the left' (l. 25). Associations with the troubled history of the Rhineland emerge across this section through an exploration of borders, racism, allies and supremacy. Contested and problematised sovereignty is thematised in the same phrase in the corruption of 'Spain' to 'spine' and 'rain' (perhaps via 'reign') to 'rhine'. The plodding motif is picked up by a newly-introduced lyric 'i', who walks 'onto the street [...] without a compact laptop' (ll. 29–30). The final part of the poem continues to move by way of sound, making a senseless 'rubble' out of a list of writers' and artists' names. The lyric 'i' becomes the more certain 'I', who states, 'but I throw my own Oceans/Out into the Islands of Thieves', moving so far into fantasy worlds that soon she wonders, '[a]m I far away from those/I love? Is this someone else's?'

In a poem like 'Pladd. (you who say either)', the associative force of the poet's lived experience is what can decisively bring its disparate elements together. The 'twisting' surface of the poem is an intermediary between the poet and the reader, an intermediary which is just as often concerned with protectively concealing the poet's mind – turning away, twisting out of the reader's grasp – as it is with revealing that mind – as fragments swirl forcefully toward the *disjecta membra* with which they might be reunited. Through this flux of revealing and concealing, Mendelssohn's work enacts its distinctive mode of life writing. The reader's experience of a long

poem that is integrated together in this way, by the often instinctive bricolage of a particular mind, is distinct from that of a poem woven by some different principle. The poet's networks of mnemonic associations are still encountered by each reader, albeit in a closed-off form. We could suggest, in a very faint echo of Kant's influential theory about aesthetic judgments in *The Critique of Judgment*, that these encounters awaken the reader's own associative, 'magnetic' powers, drawing those powers into texts for which they are not quite perfectly fitted, and then affording either an in-principle endless associative free play (the reader hovers on the edge of meaning, and the poet hovers just within that edge), or the coercive application of integrative force (the reader breaches the poem and shoos away the poet).<sup>22</sup>

Throughout 'Pladd. (you who say either)', the kinetics of sound and the constant activity of the artist's memory work together to enable a feeling of tired alienation: the exhaustion of having travelled through the Second World War (which crops up a lot in *Implacable Art*), as well as the anxieties of the present, and some implied personal upheavals, to come to rest in an unrecognisable place, over the ocean, where self and other are confused. There is also, in the 'planna vanna' of the first part, a submerging of the poet's name, as there often is in Mendelssohn's poetry. The negation of self as 'an nn' in 'I have been made of no', the publication as Grace Lake, and even the adoption of the spelling 'Mendelssohn', over her family name 'Mendleson', also indicate a scrambled and disguised self hiding out in the text.<sup>23</sup> In the final part of this article, I turn to the question of confession in Mendelssohn's poetry, and suggest that in its cultivation of 'hiding places' and a 'word of art', it constitutes a kind of anti-confessional life writing.

### III

In the poem 'basalt', Mendelssohn writes:

I don't talk to the police except never, the solicitor calls in the  
police because I don't want to have my house raided when I am alone with my  
little children<sup>24</sup>

In these lines, we see the interruption of a life by the state – the power of solicitor and police combining to prevent a mother from determining the space inhabited by her and her children. There is a frisson of contact with biography here: convicted of conspiracy, and therefore considered a threat to the state – events which John Barker writes about with humour in his Angry Brigade memoir *Bending the Bars* – Mendelssohn was subjected to exactly these kinds of raids after being released on parole in 1976.<sup>25</sup> The poems of *Implacable Art*, too, were collated by her friends, from her notebooks. This process was undertaken with Mendelssohn's cooperation and consent, but the fact that the poetry was written with only a very small and intimate audience in mind brings forward the poet's presence in the writing.

So: in 'basalt', we see events in which the state violently interrupts a life very like Mendelssohn's own. The opportunity to comply is imposed on the speaker – "I don't talk to the police except" – but is repelled in a voice of punk defiance, a voice often present in the collection – "I don't talk to the police except never". That line invokes the idea of confession: or more broadly, linguistic compliance within the disciplinary agency of the police.<sup>26</sup> Confession is a nominally voluntary action by which an individual can agree to participate in the legal system, to consent to be treated as a criminal. The confessing party, permeated by state power, becomes an instrument of the state, someone who colludes with cops, lawyers, judges and guards in their own punishment.

In 'basalt', the idea that compromise may be possible, that there exists some innocuous way to "talk to the police" that won't risk slipping into confession, is an idea which Mendelssohn wholly rejects. Instead, Mendelssohn insists, "I don't talk to the police except never": not only do I happen to have not yet confessed to this or that, but I *cannot* have confessed to anything at all. Thus any action by the state that treats her or the characters and voices of her poems as suspects or criminals is undertaken without her authority: Mendelssohn does not accept the justice of the criminal retribution system.

Confession has more than one meaning. The term does something slightly different in the contexts of law, religion, and poetry, but these contexts are not unconnected. In his two lectures 'About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the

Self, Michel Foucault describes confession, in its Christian religious context, as the manifestation of the self, in language, before a witness. The witness in Foucault's process is 'the image of God': a figure who makes the fact of having revealed oneself honestly to God tangible to the confessing party.<sup>27</sup> This is an easy analogue for confession within the legal system, with the state and its officials standing in for God and his images. It also suggests the connection between legal "guilt" and spiritual or religious "sin". In John 3:4, it is set out that "whosoever committeth a sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law".<sup>28</sup> The Jewish Zohar, in the book of Genesis, further articulates sin as perpetually "staining" the character of the sinner: "a sin leaves a mark; repeated, it deepens the mark; when committed a third time, the mark becomes a stain".<sup>29</sup> With God taken out of the equation, "sin" can be understood as part of social identity: legal violations leave a "stain" that is deeper than any formal debt, any system of remedies and penalties. The justice system might profess rehabilitation, but the permanence of its records and the complicity of, for example, the state and the press, create a permanently marked character in the same way that the external confession of sin does, especially in religious traditions that require penance for sins committed and confessed. The function of confession should be to know yourself honestly as God knows you, and to take the opportunity to make reparations to God or to your fellow humans: socially, though, it becomes the practice of marking yourself as outside the law. The state that continues violent surveillance even after a sentence has been served considers convicts to be permanently marked, contaminated by a social miasma very like the spiritual one communicated in the Zohar.

The writing and reading of life writing also meets Foucault's criteria: the constitution of the self, in language, before a witness. In the characterisation of the reader as police, Mendelssohn invokes a tradition in which that confession isn't the benign construction of the self, an admission that you are as God knows you to be, but rather the social staining of one's own character. There is a strand of Judeo-Christian thought that emphasises that humans, necessarily falling short of godliness, must be constantly aware of the nature and extent of their sin, as Nietzsche argues in *Human*,

*All Too Human*.<sup>30</sup> This conception of sin is comparable to the experience of guilt under a state in which anything you do say may be given in evidence: the *only* form of speech possible is confession, with innocence an unattainable state.

Similarly, the state may make use of the power at its disposal to *force* compliance, so that confession becomes unnecessary or epiphenomenal. This is exactly what we see in the raids of 'basalt', or the separation of mother from children in 'the ribbon and white'. Police raids, the constant emergence and submersion of the name 'Anna' throughout the collection, references to people and places, and family and Jewish history, all cohere to make the poems of *Implacable Art* a distinctive form of life writing. Mendelssohn's acute awareness of the brutality of the criminal justice system, and the fact that it incorporates confession into the system, actively complicates the confessional aspects of her poetry. By refusing to "talk to the police", she refuses to surrender her autonomy to their system. She makes it clear that to construe her artwork as *evidence* in any sense is to go against her will – a challenge for the literary critic here, perhaps – and constitutes a form of invasion or theft, rather than any kind of ethically binding confession. Yet her work also recognises that even a "no comment" interview cannot withhold communication entirely. Silence and noncompliance still register within the legal regime, and are still legible to state power. Nor is there any way to contest what counts as legitimate or illegitimate confession without agreeing to "talk to the police". Mendelssohn's poetry, then, moves away from one kind of confession and towards another, dramatizing a problem of freedom: is *any* form of confession – of self-constitution – beyond the reaches of the state?

Something of this kind seems to be at play in the earlier lines of 'basalt', in which Mendelssohn writes, "the confrontation between the artist & the authorities of white needlework results in/the artist being locked up without paint, water and paper".<sup>31</sup> The authorities are of "white needlework": Mendelssohn's choice of metaphor seems to bring the authorities into the art world, but nevertheless ends with the artist incarcerated, and unable to create. The "white needlework" seems clinical, bringing together different forms of institution and turning the prisoner into a patient who is being treated by the state – and possibly, given the creative

potential of the needle, being told how and what to create. There is no translation possible between the forces of the artist and the authorities. Despite the initial hint of promise in the encounter – foreshadowing “I don't talk to the police except” – mutual understanding is fundamentally impossible, and the state's response is, always, to lock up and control the artist.

We should of course be careful of too readily reading references to art, artists, and worlds of art in Mendelssohn's collection as biographical. Even lines which might quickly and convincingly be traced to episodes of her biography deserve a more enigmatic and provisional status. Just like the more openly cryptic moments in Mendelssohn's poetry, such lines might also be treated as highly figurative and mercurial language, whose many flickering meanings are determined by the associative logic of the poet's lived experience, and by fragile collusions with readers – or at least, those readers who are willing to forgo the imposition of linear narrative or argument, who are prepared to participate without interrogating.

This form of life writing is anti-confessional, figuring the reader as always potentially an agent of juridical and carceral state power. It nourishes fragile hopes of sidestepping the problem of legitimate confession, of taking poet and reader to secret places away from the controlling influence of the state, to worlds made exclusively of ideas, not of selves and facts.<sup>32</sup> In 'I have been made of no', the submersion of 'Anna' into 'an nn' refers to a loss of identity that is also a moment of liberation: poetry becomes a space that permits us to drop those aspects of ourselves by which the state grabs hold of us.<sup>33</sup> The first person singular then may become simply a voice. If that voice speaks coherently, then its coherence derives partly from the poet's lived experience, and partly from the reader's.

#### IV

Through comparisons with Raworth's work, this article has tried to demonstrate what is distinctive about Mendelssohn's peculiar modes of secrecy. Although both poets take up and problematise life writing, Mendelssohn's is distinct in its relationship to confession, figuring the reader as always potentially an agent of juridical and carceral state power. First of all, like Raworth, Mendelssohn cultivates language

surfaces which, in their perpetual twisting and turning, offer both to reveal and to conceal the lived experience which ultimately guarantees their coherence. This allows for the poet to be tangibly present in the poetry, whilst remaining behind a protective 'membrane', allowing her to preserve a certain amount of autonomy. But there are also broad distinctions between Mendelssohn's and Raworth's language surfaces. Raworth's enacts a tension that holds the poet's and reader's perspectives as almost entirely separate. Its reflexive qualities may tease the reader with the possibility of greater coherence, more authoritative closure. But on the whole, any reader who refuses to merely hover on the edge of meaning will be met with a kind of indifference. Mendelssohn's work, on the other hand, is animated by a far more intimate mistrust of the reader. It asks for the reader and poet to be able to share experience – up to a certain point, and provided that the presence identified with the poet always has somewhere safe to retreat to. This sense of 'comingling' is connected with Mendelssohn's recognition of the difficulty or impossibility of rejecting mechanisms of surveillance and incarceration. In this sense, it is also directly anti-confessional: Mendelssohn's poetry seeks spaces in which one consciousness can meet and share feeling with another, without being able to define or quantify that feeling, or instrumentalise it within assertions about who is responsible for what. Mendelssohn's poetry doesn't confess: it mixes up the poet's life with a number of other things, including literary references, art criticism and political polemic. It constitutes a way of feeling that is available to a sympathetic reader, that is contingent upon the poet's life, but that never quite reaches a statement of self, although it gestures tantalisingly towards that notion throughout. There is a challenge, then, to the kind of knowledge that inhabits the index of a poetry book or of state records (the pun here is unintentional, but the contents page for *Implacable Art* is of course at the back of the book): Mendelssohn generates a poetry that enables to reader to feel with her, and to feel as she feels, but not to record what, or how, she is.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn Obituary'. *The Guardian*, 25/12/2009. <https://www.theguardian.com>.

com/theguardian/2009/dec/15/anna-Mendelssohn-obituary.

- <sup>3</sup> Peter Riley (above, note ii).
- <sup>4</sup> Sean Bonney, "Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform" – Anna Mendelssohn'. *The Poetry Project Review*, Feb/Mar 2011, pp. 17–19.
- <sup>5</sup> Anna Mendelssohn Symposium, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2017. <https://amsymposium.wordpress.com>.
- <sup>6</sup> Brian Reed, 'Carry on, England: Tom Raworth's "West Wind," Intuition, and Neo-Avant-Garde Poetics'. *Contemporary Literature* 47.3 (2006), 170–206, p. 172.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Staged Whispers', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), p. 3, ll. 1–4.
- <sup>8</sup> Tom Raworth, 'West Wind', in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 367, ll. 353–375. Line numbers for 'West Wind' count each drawing, including those that stretch to a whole page, as a single line in the verse.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Carry on, England...' (above, note vi), p. 178.
- <sup>10</sup> 'West Wind', in *Collected Poems* (above, note viii), p. 356, ll. 41–46.
- <sup>11</sup> Simon Perril, "What Rhymes with Cow/and Starts with an N': Tom Raworth's Time and Motion Studies". In Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Gig Issue 13/14: Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2003), pp. 108–129, p. 112.
- <sup>12</sup> John Wilkinson, 'Tripping the Light Fantastic: Tom Raworth's *Ace*'. In *Removed for Further Study* (above, note xi), p. 145.
- <sup>13</sup> 'West Wind', in *Collected Poems* (above, note viii), p. 358, ll. 134–136.
- <sup>14</sup> Perril (above, note xi), p. 127. My emphasis.
- <sup>15</sup> Tom Orange, 'Notes for A Reading of *Ace*'. In *Removed for Further Study* (above, note xi), pp. 161–9, p. 165.
- <sup>16</sup> *Removed for Further Study* (above, note xi).
- <sup>17</sup> 'Lie Still Lie Still', in *Collected Poems* (above, note viii), p. 74, ll. 5–12.
- <sup>18</sup> Perrill (above, note xi), p. 121.
- <sup>19</sup> Wilkinson (above, note xi), p. 156.
- <sup>20</sup> 'zinzolin', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), pp. 98–9, ll. 10–11.
- <sup>21</sup> 'pladd. (you who say either)', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), p. 17, ll. 10–16.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1790]), pp. 122–123.
- <sup>23</sup> 'I have been made of no', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), p. 106.
- <sup>24</sup> 'basalt', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), pp. 71–2, ll. 24–6.
- <sup>25</sup> John Barker, *Bending the Bars: Prison Stories of an Angry Brigade Member* (London: Christie Books, 2007), p. 30.
- <sup>26</sup> For more on this line, and its implications for the kind of reader 'who is not a cop' demanded by Mendelssohn's poetry, see Sean Bonney's article, 'Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, Feb/Mar. 2011, #225, pp. 17–19, p. 17. This article was instrumental in forming the position put forward here.
- <sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, 'About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth'. *Political Theory*, vol. 21 no. 2 (May, 1993), p. 198.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, John 3: 4.
- <sup>29</sup> *Tanakh*, "The Zorah", Genesis 73b.
- <sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann, *Human, All Too Human* (London: Faber, 1994 [1878]).
- <sup>31</sup> 'basalt', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), pp. 71–2, ll. 6–8.

<sup>32</sup> In this diminished commitment to expressiveness, the term might be fruitfully contrasted with New Narrative, a label used of work by experimental life writers such as Kevin Killian and Kathy Acker. New Narrative "blurs the line between fiction and autobiography [...] For the writer, the trick is to embrace the narrative while at the same time exercising a critically reflexive distance. This balance is always at risk of being dismissed as postmodern irony, but what New Narrative ultimately seeks is a textual performance that can recognize itself as a cultural construct and simultaneously affirm the political value of a life-changing story." Kaplan Harris, 'New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry', *American Literature* 81: 4 (2009), p. 806 (pp. 805–832).

<sup>33</sup> 'I have been made of no', in *Implacable Art* (above, note i), pp. 107–8, l. 8.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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