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ARTICLE

'[A] poet must know more than | a surface suggests': Reading and Secrecy in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn

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In stating that a 'poet must know | more than a surface suggests' (*Propaganda multi-billion bun*), Anna Mendelssohn ascribes to the poet a kind of secret knowledge of that which resides beyond the apparent meaning of a poem, beneath its textual surface or skin. This article considers how far a reader of Mendelssohn's poetry can be invited to share in this knowledge – on what grounds and at what risk. Mendelssohn's construction of such hidden poetic knowledge is also considered in the light of Walter Benjamin's contention that the secret is of fundamental importance to the production of aesthetic experience itself. If a reader of Mendelssohn 'mustn't touch the hiding places' (*Implacable Art*) of a text, then how do we, as readers, offer close, interpretive attention to Mendelssohn's difficult, implacable poetry without intruding on its secrets?

In foregrounding close-readings of one of Mendelssohn's most encoded texts, her pamphlet *An Account of a Mummy, in the Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden* (1986), textual disruptions of the relationship between concealment and exposure, and questions of readability and unreadability are explored. Teasing out moments of poetic secreting and revealing in Mendelssohn's work, this article considers how far Mendelssohn's poetics resists the logic of interrogation – and asks, crucially, what is at stake in such resistance for a close-reader of her poetry.

Keywords: Anna Mendelssohn; Grace Lake; secrets; Walter Benjamin; Winklemann; Wittgenstein; Apollinaire

There are moments when the reader of Anna Mendelssohn's poetry feels themselves to be initiated into a secret poetic world within her work; and there are moments when such a reader is explicitly, sometimes uncomfortably, disabused of such a fantasy, debarred from such a space. The construction and reading of poetry always

requires a negotiation of what is part-private and part-public, and in Mendelssohn's work the crossing between these can feel peculiarly perilous. In *Implacable Art* (2000) Mendelssohn titles and addresses a poem 'to any who want poems to give them answers', cautioning her readers: 'a poem is not going to give precise directions. | you mustn't touch the hiding places.'¹ Constructed in these lines is a poetics which resists certain modes of reading, resists interrogation, and seeks to protect the secrets of the poem's 'hiding places'. The lines conjure a reader finding her own way through the text without placing too much pressure on the poem or forcing her way through; such a poetics is figured spatially – almost bodily – as a kind of navigation that might be exploratory but must not be exploitative. What might be secreted in the poem's 'hiding places' will never be revealed through answers given under duress and might, in the end, serve only to represent what cannot be assimilated into unifying interpretive explanation. As this article hopes to show, Mendelssohn's poetry often involves manoeuvring around, rather than through, the resistances it poses; reading this work can involve interpreting in the presence of that which is uninterpretable. In response, this article aims to enact a kind of reading that avoids repressing the text's resistances: as such, some passages in what follows will foreground extended close-readings of the poetry.²

The poetry's 'hiding places' invite speculation not only about what is hidden there, but also about why poetry should be furnished with hiding places at all. Walter Benjamin suggests that one essential quality common to all aesthetic objects is their unreadability; their secret. He writes: 'Never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret [...] the being of beauty lies in the secret'.³ Benjamin proposes the secreted as a fundamental aesthetic principle, indeed as the basis of the existence of beauty. Mendelssohn's poetics can be read in line with this formulation. And yet there is a vulnerability at play in Mendelssohn's work that is sometimes expressed as a kind of defensiveness: 'you mustn't touch' is surely a response to a perceived threat. Benjamin's aesthetic secrets feel safe – it seems impossible to access them – but Mendelssohn's seem less secure, as if even attempts to access them risk damage.

If Mendelssohn seeks to complicate Benjamin's aesthetic secret, this could correspond to an ambivalence toward the contents of such hiding places. After all, capital has its secrets too: Marx's texts are replete with them.⁴ Mendelssohn's 'poet must know | more than a surface suggests',⁵ but is sometimes also troubled by the prospect that this deeper poetic knowledge may not only be concealed, but incarcerated in her work. At times Mendelssohn's work is concerned by the possibility that even poetic hiding places might be carceral in structure, or may provide a keep for things repressed by bourgeois society and the machinations of capital. One challenge Mendelssohn faces in her poetry is how to encode the aesthetic secret without constructing poetry that exhibits structural or methodological resemblances with the abstractions and repressions fundamental to capital and its protector, the law. This leads her work on to ask urgent questions about the basis of representational structures and their readability.

'[D]ishing for objects'

This article argues that Mendelssohn's poetry shapes modes of reading that enable particular kinds of encounters with the secrets of the aesthetic. It considers one of Mendelssohn's most encoded works: her pamphlet *An Account of a Mummy, in The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden*.⁶ The cryptic qualities of this four-page poetic document begin with authorship and attribution, and shift across philosophy, politics, economics and even typography. The small pamphlet was published in 1986 in Cambridge under the name Grace Lake, one of a number of pen-names used by Mendelssohn, and also her official name between 1983 and 1997. The pamphlet is likely to have been self-published by Mendelssohn and handed out to friends, perhaps fellow undergraduate students; Mendelssohn had returned to university to study English as a mature student, after dropping out of Essex in the 1960s. The print-run would have been small and the only two existing copies available for public consultation are viewable at the British Library and University of Sussex. The text is, as many of Mendelssohn's texts are, extensive in its philosophical and cultural references and is also thematically wide-ranging in the breadth of topics the poetry touches on and thinks through. The work incorporates references to Paul

Celan, life in Cambridge, issues of class and gender, prison, Ludwig Wittgenstein, mummies, lace curtains, Scotland Yard, Marcel Proust, Dresden, Margret Thatcher, Guillaume Apollinaire, and many more literary and cultural allusions besides. The text brings together disparate concerns, not, I would argue, for the sake of endless proliferation of possible meaning, but as a way to constellate and question how to read these figures, objects and ideas in the aesthetic world of the poem – and to demonstrate how the poem can read them. The poetic structure gives particular kinds of access to such figures and objects, as we read them through the frame of the text's encodings.

The pamphlet's first poem, 'Not So Good', begins with the line: 'Ashen hair green ashen hair grey'. Its curatorial meticulousness may suggest the eponymous 'account of a mummy': just the museum trip a reader might expect. Yet the poem unfolds indeterminately –

Ashen hair green ashen hair grey
 goes the smiling sod sop, goes
 the trailing day, simply stranger
 talks to the lair, dishing for objects
 like candles in airy separation
 weeds in chrysanthemum beds

The sense of place – and our placement in the poem – is constructed through objects in snippets of scenes; Mendelssohn's text, dense with nouns, involves navigating these objects' uncertain significance. Equally, the verbs have indeterminate subjects (is the 'sod sop' really 'smiling?'), disrupting our ability to order objects and activities. Attempts to integrate these fragments into a narrative – perhaps a foolhardy stranger brandishing a torch into the gloom of the mummy's lair? – feel unconvincing. Objects multiply and mutate: a 'grey rabbit in its lair' emerges a few lines later, as if the offspring of the 'ashen [hare]', while 'candles in airy separation' make way for later 'castles in air'. The terms 'ashen hair' and 'trailing day' repeat variously, reappearing as if the poem wants to insist that these terms designate certain things, but without telling us what.

The text accumulates things without integrating them in any familiar fashion. As they amass, the reader may begin to feel hemmed in and grow desperate to de-clutter, to weed out the poem's pollution, and clear space for the poem's 'objects' – both in the sense of stable things and definite goals. The presence of 'ash', 'sod' and 'weeds' might suggest dirt as an important element in the poem, cautioning us against throwing things out which may play unperceived roles in the poem's dense pattern of signification. 'Dishing' hints at *dishing the dirt*, cohering semantically with 'sod' and 'chrysanthemum beds'. '[D]ishing for objects' may suggest wishing for, fishing for, or – via a play on the kitchen utensils *dish* and *pan* – panning for objects, even panning for gold. In substituting candle-dishes – capable of catching their dissolving objects – for gold-pans, Mendelssohn casts doubt on the desirability and viability of processes of filtration. If the poem discourages methods of sieving and straining (*panning for*), it instead encourages us to encounter the work's multiple granularities; to encounter their risk, perhaps their secret.

As these obscure objects pile up we may feel suffocated, even entombed, by their quick accumulation. Air flows fitfully through the poem, clogged with candle ash and castle crenels; 'air' turning stale inside a secret 'lair', or entangled within 'hair'. Air becomes both a breath of air and a stagnant restriction of it.⁷ As a metatextual comment on the poetic density of the work, this repetition enacts J.H. Prynne remarks that '[p]oetry is surprising, and good difficult poems sometimes surprise us so much that we can hardly breathe'.⁸ Mendelssohn's control of air in this poem, is not only figurative, but is enacted in the reader's embodying of the language. It is in the repeated enunciation of 'air' that the named substance passes out of our bodies; a loss via language that must be mitigated on the next in-breath. A complex dialectic connecting language and the body, naming and objects, as well as words and strangulation, lies at the centre of this pamphlet's preoccupations. While repetitions of actions, settings, objects and sounds build a multisensory scene, this poem is not always interested in causality or syllogism; it would sometimes rather explore the rich and strange reaches of language's senses. The poem challenges a reader to sift through possible semantic senses while remaining alert to the kinds of meaning which might rhyme or flutter through patterns in the text without congealing into

certainty. In Mendelssohn's poetry, she is consistently responsive to meaning that can be generated – not hidden – by its secreting. Like Benjamin's aesthetic secret, which engenders the character of the aesthetic itself, some of what is concealed in Mendelssohn's poetry is not susceptible to revelation, but draws its meaning from its unreadability.

The question of difficulty hovers in the text, prompted both by the poem's form and its ambiguous scene-setting. The formal difficulty of Mendelssohn's work requires a variety of modes of attention and styles of reading practices to find points of access. Textual difficulty may offer this work the ability to construct particular kinds of relations with objects outside the text, as textual difficulty, again according to Prynne, is responsive to the ontological priority of the outside world. On the 'syntactical difficulty underpinned by [the] etymological and phonetic resistance' of difficult poems, Prynne writes that 'the substantial medium of the artist and the autonomy of his [*sic*] creation establish the priority of the world while at the same time making it accessible'.⁹ For Prynne, textual resistance, which unavoidably presents the anteriority and priority of the world to its linguistic rendering, 'offer[s] both the difficulty of contrivance and also a profound assurance that this difficulty corresponds to genuine resistance in the larger context of the outside world'.¹⁰ Such a method resists the easy linguistic rendering of the world, which would enact a process akin to reification; the difficult is able to get closer towards representing a kind of fidelity to substance. In some sense, then, aesthetic and poetic difficulty respects the secret of the thing, and avoids seeking to strip away its resistances by rendering them readable. The aesthetic secret serves mimetically to represent things in the resistance of their particularity.

The poetry's voicing involves a kind of loss that enacts the priority of the world; analogously, Prynne considers the process of making-accessible through difficulty akin to our experience of the world through our bodies, with their various resistances.¹¹ The question of reading the body and its relation to reading the body-of-the-poem becomes an important area of exploration in Mendelssohn's poetry. Textual difficulty continues to disrupt 'Not So Good' and through the

poetic drama of the revelations and concealments of its representations, forms of risk and violence begin to play out across the body. An initial suggestion of bodily violence occurs in the next lines: 'clip | after clip [...] with each cut lip'. The onomatopoeic 'clip' represents a violent moment sonically and semantically – and plays a further descriptive role as it takes on the feel of 'cut lip' elided in speed. The representational status of 'clip' becomes uncertain and multiple yet highly condensed, bringing interpretive questions into view. Violence serves to pressurise or distort representation here, while forms of reading also feel implicated in some way. A few lines later, we find:

chrysanthemum bled, hair wiry
ashen shock, hand wound round with
trailing ribbons, the dream must
be your own, your own scene

We've shifted from 'chrysanthemum bed' to 'chrysanthemum bled': has a garden now become a crime scene? The sonic pressure of 'round' encourages us to read an internal rhyme in the next line, 'hand wound round', but the semantic suggestion of 'bled' and 'cut lip', forces the possibility of a latent injury – 'ashen shock' becomes the reaction to a 'hand wound[,] round with | trailing ribbons'. This shape of a dribbling wound could also describe the violent transformation of the whole hand with its trailing fingers (and their fingerprints) into a kind of injury, as the body is impressed with shifting linguistic meanings, altering its readability. This image is held up against the reading of the body as unproblematic carrier of meaning, while the sense of danger seems to warn the reader that reading the body's evidences might somehow be bound up in the reading of the poem, as dactyl shifts unnervingly towards dactyloscopy.

The 'dream' that 'must | be your own, your own scene' evokes the previous 'castles in air', suggesting wish-fulfilment dreams, perhaps serving as a figure for the poetic realm; yet this dream seems to be a nightmare involving shock and a crime scene. The poem begins to mimic a scene of psychoanalysis in which psychic material

surfaces in abstractions, refracted by language, to be interpreted. Interpreting any dream requires specific methods of reading and analysing, and Mendelssohn folds this interpretive mode (along with others) into the text of the poem. The question of who is reading whom remains implicit: we as reader might assume the role of analyst and interpreter, but Mendelssohn is reminding us that this dream scene is also our own; we bring to the poem our own psychic content and means of repression, as well as the physically mediating presence of our bodies and breath. Mendelssohn imbeds within the poem the implication that no reading technique remains objective or neutral, or even impersonal.

In the poem's closing lines, the 'trailing ribbons' resurface as 'embroidered petticoats' that decorate 'rabbits' and, along with 'cut hair', these images illustrate forms of cultural meanings expressed on and through the body. '[E]mbroidered petticoats' go on to become synecdochal characters (like 'ashen hair') in the first line of the next poem where 'embroidered petticoats are sunning themselves'. Mendelssohn's employment of synecdoche here in combination with the gendered implications of petticoats and painted nails, suggests gendering as a form of synecdoche: where parts are persistently taken for the whole. Modes of reading, particularly modes of reading the body are increasingly brought into question in the pamphlet. This poem closes with 'the indelible flutter of the past'; this indelibility that flutters suggests a kind of living thing that is marked lastingly. Like the 'ashen hair' that flutters through the poem, trailing cumulative meanings, the past's indelible marks upon the animate are constructed as interlinkingly linguistic, experiential and bodily.

'[S]ister's frills are a lie'

The disruption of gendered markers (and other markers) that are mapped onto the body increasingly becomes a point of concern as we move through the pamphlet. The poems begin to consider connections between forms of representation and the lived experience of social relations, and the stakes of reading this relationality. The 'frills' of feminised gendering, for example, are presented as a mode of covering over, whereby both oppression and its expression are secreted into its form. This

section will consider the presentation of this kind of concealment in the second of the pamphlet's four poems; the following lines appear early in 'Not Bad':

but sister's frills are a lie, [...] smacking of lips,
swish go the drapes, the murderer planted in the field, [...]
one side for the girls, one side for the boys, [...]
glitter for the former, what were they like?

The 'frills' and 'glitter' interspersed with violence implies a continuum of logic between gendered clothing, segregation and gendered violence. If 'sister's frills are a lie', then social markers of gender seemingly misrepresent gendered existence – particularly in the association between women and decoration – and the presence of the murderer ('he', it seems) suggests that this extends beyond the field of representation into dangerous social practices and realities. The 'murderer' plants or buries the swishing 'drapes' (as in the 'frills' and 'petticoats', and recalling the 'trailing ribbons' which are both decoration and wound) in a field, while the 'smacking of lips' takes on a violence in the context of the 'cut lip' of the previous poem. The difficulty involved in interpreting the hidden social relations expressed in, and reinforced by, conventional modes of representation culminates in the unanswered question, 'what were they like?' The latent theme of burial (picking up on the dirt and tombs) along with clothes that lie, creates a sense of layers of significance and subterranean meaning contained within expression and representation; reminding us that poetry deals with 'more than a surface suggests'.¹²

The representation of femininity as an unchallenging decorative adjunct does not only deny the difficulty involved in representing gendered experience but serves to conceal relations of power. Such 'frills' and 'ribbons' recur again at the end of the poem in the context of revelation and concealment, in the figure of 'white lace' curtains that recall the previous 'drapes':

she's not even fit for burning, so, waft white lace
in her window's embrace, the yearning's not for learning

The apparent imperative 'so, waft white lace' and the appearance of drapes and curtains in the poem positions the reader uncertainly. Are we looking out voyeuristically at a murder scene through a window framed with lace? Or are we looking in through 'her window's' white lace trying to learn what the lace curtains conceal within the interior? The lace that frames our perception and the rhymes that cross the lines of the poem obliquely evokes the mesh-like imagery of the sieving and straining methods of the previous poem. The kinds of value systems through which we sift out the valuable or meaningful, here begin to frame our perceptions, shaping our positioning, and seem to actively interact with what we perceive, what 'learning' is possible.

With the detournement of Thatcher in 'the yearning's not for learning', the political landscape of the time shapes the language of the poem, suggesting the impossibility of removing the conditions of writing from a text, no matter how buried they might seem. The pamphlet's front cover bears the date 'Oct. 1986', the month of Thatcher's mass economic deregulation of financial markets that was designed to consolidate the power of the finance sector over the economy; a process which continued the attempts to destroy workers' collective power and unionised struggle (particularly in the miners' strike of the previous year). Thatcher's perpetration of state violence against workers is presumably what prompts the judgement that 'she's not even fit for burning' (the famous line from Thatcher's speech referenced Christopher Fry's romantic comedy 'The Lady's not for Burning'). The rhyming clause is part-resistance, part-joke, as Thatcher's refusal to turn turns on her. Thatcher's deployment of femininity seems to trouble this section too, as the feminine 'white lace' serves to conceal the violence of power and, as curtains, conceals and contains workers' traumas within a domestic space (whose struggles and yearnings Thatcherite politics refuses to learn about); decoration becomes weaponised in such a setting. This is expressed throughout the pamphlet in the connection between ribbons and wounds, as the over-determination of gender roles, particularly feminised ones, is linked to oppression. Mendelssohn seems to want to shift perspective in order to re-read the synecdoches differently, searching

for a mode of representation that refuses to replicate the concealment of – and abuse of – power.

The representational status of the window, its 'embrace' – perhaps of the 'white lace' – and its relation to the positioning of the reader is complexly rendered; our position in relation to structures of power and our perception of them are never simplistically represented. How we read the symbolism of the window, its transparency and its framing of the scene might be linked to the closing line of the pamphlet, which is presented in double quotation marks: "Les Tours sont les rues". This line is from French proto-Surrealist poet Guillaume Apollinaire's poem 'Les Fenêtres'¹³ (the line closes the pamphlet following a paragraph of quoted material relating to Apollinaire). The assertion that the 'towers are the streets' suggests a landscape of damage, but also a toppling and a transfer of power to the streets, to the people. This is presented within the framing of poetry (through 'The Windows'), implying perhaps that from whatever position you read the poem, or the window, the vertical hierarchies of power must be flattened and that poetry might offer us a frame through which to perceive this.

'[P]oesie has its time'

The imagery of burial in 'Not Bad' and the entombed mummy of 'Not So Good' is one expression in Mendelssohn's work of her repeated thinking-through of processes of occluded or buried meaning and impact of these on lived social relations, as well as on poetics. One figure Mendelssohn utilises in a later text to signify meaning residing beneath the surface, or meaning through difficulty, is the character of 'Bernache Nonnette' and her concealed nest. Mendelssohn's 1995 pamphlet, *Bernache Nonnette*, is named after a species of goose, also known as the barnacle goose. As these geese nest on remote cliffs in the North Atlantic, their breeding habits remained obscure to European naturalists for centuries, giving rise to fantastical folk tales: popular speculation imagined their goslings hatching from barnacles attached to driftwood.¹⁴ In Andrew Duncan's review of *Bernache Nonnette*, he identifies the significance of these geese for Mendelssohn's text:

It was the unfindableness of barnacle goose nests which led to the saw about a wild goose chase, and indirection, elusiveness, looping around, wild flights, resolutions withdrawn by subterfuge at the last minute, are structural rules in this book. The mystery nesting sites full of fluffy barnacle goslings are a figure both of some Mother Goose fairytale land and of a terrain of poetic fantasy, perhaps the society where we want to live.¹⁵

Elusiveness and unfindableness feel like structural rules for readers of Mendelssohn; the kind of difficulty involved in approaching the poetic figure of Bernache Nonnette dramatises the resistance of the external world to representation, but also presents a resistance to certain modes of engaging with the work. In her *Implacable Art*, Mendelssohn sets out a similar conception of poetics: 'poesie has its time', she writes, '& when there is | fear of retribution it flies into the light | or falls silently into the pitch dark'.¹⁶ The flight and subsequent enshrouding of 'poesie' recalls the flight of *Bernache Nonnette*, as well as the burial-imagery of *An Account of a Mummy*. Mendelssohn's goose and mummy, like her conception of poetry, require spaces where they can exempt themselves from the pressures of retribution and, perhaps, interrogation; only then can they mark out for us the society in which we might want our young to live.

But if a poet must know more than a surface suggests, is a reader invited to share in this subterranean knowledge too? How far can we gain access to this unfindable world, and how much does Mendelssohn want us to be there? Discernible is also the shadow of a troubling dialectic slippage that connects the elusive, hidden terrain of poetic freedom and that of capital's power, concealed beneath its misrepresentations. How the resistance at the core of Benjamin's fundamentally aesthetic secret might function to block this slippage is a question to which *An Account of a Mummy's* final poem, 'No Timing', and the prose section at the close of the pamphlet begin to frame an answer. At stake in these questions is the legibility of power and its concealing representations, and how the poetic might work to re-read and repopulate such secret territories.

Swans do bite

Of the misrepresentations generated by capital's power, reified forms of linguistic representation perhaps threaten poetic expression most. Such language comes under scrutiny in the pamphlet's the final poem, 'No Timing', as the poem stakes out possible philosophical and poetic responses to the apparent self-evidence of the simplified expressions of commodified language, and what is elided beneath it. In 'No Timing', we are introduced to the figure of the 'new poet', apparently mass-produced and quality-assessed in a sinister, Edenic, surveilled industrial landscape of 'England[s] | gardens' and '[t]he yards of [...] Scotland'. The figure of Scotland Yard, obscured but nonetheless perceptible, is seemingly lurking in the undergrowth, perhaps waiting to pounce on the 'new poet'. That '[t]he metres tick, the kilos weigh' (in the next line) suggests a measuring and weighing by Scotland Yard, of the words of this poet as evidence. Yet this 'new poet', we discover in the next line, 'must be STAINLESS STEEL'. The capitalisation of 'STAINLESS STEEL' implies a mark of authenticity stamped into utensils as evidence of quality for the consumer. The next word, 'bellowing', plays on the movement of the bellows of a steel factory (it was in response to events in 1980, which included the steelworkers' strike, that Thatcher made her 'lady's not for turning' speech). Mendelssohn is perhaps suggesting that the 'new poet' who 'must be STAINLESS STEEL' and stamped like a commodity, should be paying more attention to the 'bellowing, shrieking, screaming' of production than trying to appear shiny and authentic to the consumer. The role of state security services in defeating workers' disputes (and perhaps in victimising poets and writers sympathetic to them) is hinted at through the forms of measurement and evidence that run through this section of the poem, alongside the shadowy presence of the figure of Scotland Yard. The stanza begins to bring into focus the spectre of how the law reads poetry, which has perhaps troubled the text previously, and this concern is shaped alongside the question of the readability of the commodity.¹⁷

The 'STAINLESS STEEL' of the commodity is the impossible language of the literal: the stamp in the steel collapses substance and mediator, object and representation. In collapsing the description and the material described, the commodity proclaims

its absolute readability. Such a readability is constructed by the concealment of the hidden dead labour the commodity truly represents, and can only represent. The language of the Iron Lady – with its apparent transparency and through which the state violently protects the commodity over the worker – is turned, detoured, exposed as falsity. The question of readability and modes of writing is again perceptible as the language of the commodity that violently represses the representation of the worker and modes of production ('bellowing, shrieking, screaming') is presented in tandem with the weighing and measuring of the words of a poet by the police. The kind of distortion involved in the commodity's label and the label of the evidence bag are posited as comparable forms of linguistic engagement with the world, ones which imagine surface as uncomplicated representation. The secret of the commodity and legal modes of interpretation are presented as a false literalism that poetic difficulty and ambiguity are at odds with. Textual difficulty's ability to respect the primacy of the thing in the external world works against and re-works a language that can only be read in one way.

The final lines of this poem read:

Death agony coming
 Wittgenstein's way, I should duck if I were you;
 SwWnA N' S B I T E.
 swan's do bite, thorns do pierce

In placing Wittgenstein alongside 'duck', Mendelssohn makes a humorous reference to Wittgenstein's famous 'duckrabbit' thought experiment. In this experiment, Wittgenstein contemplates a simple line drawing that can appear to a viewer as either a duck or a rabbit, depending on which way it is thought about. Wittgenstein suggests that this demonstrates the difference between 'seeing that' (seeing that a drawing is a drawing) and 'seeing as' (seeing the drawing as a duck or as a rabbit) and furthermore, the mode of 'seeing as' implies the possibility of the linguistic mediation of perception.¹⁸ Wittgenstein's example also demonstrates that we see the drawing as the duck or as the rabbit, we don't perceive both at

once, even though we know they coexist. Our perception of one, in this schema, generates and depends upon the repression of the other. Mendelssohn's reminder to us that Wittgenstein is dead and 'swans do bite', pokes fun at the limits of philosophy. Yet Mendelssohn simultaneously incorporates a number of equivalent linguistic examples of Wittgenstein's experiment into the pamphlet, such as the play of wound/wound, as well as sonic versions like hare/hair, and semantic plays like yard/Yard. The pamphlet also includes a duck at the end of the sequence, while the rabbit (or hare) appears at the start; an indication, perhaps, of poetry's capacity to enact shifts in perception.

The submerged reference to Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (playing on swan/Swann) nods towards a modernist literary lineage indebted to a Wittgenstein-ian resistance to fixity of meaning and interpretation. One passage in the text also suggests Wittgenstein's sense of the duality of perception: 'For there were, in the environs of Combray, two "ways" which we used to take for our walks, and so diametrically opposed that we would actually leave the house by a different door'; one of these 'ways' is 'Swann's way'.¹⁹ This mode of binary perception is perhaps resisted in Mendelssohn's erratic grammar ('SwWnA N' S B I T E | swan's do bite') that muddies the boundaries between one mode of perception and another. The persistent apostrophe in Mendelssohn's text suggests the bite of a swan, and as Swann, this might refer to the famous scene in *Swann's Way*, in which a madeleine cake triggers Marcel's *memoire involuntaire*. A theme which occupies Mendelssohn in this pamphlet is the representational status of objects: the kinds of secrets held in them. Yet there also remains a warning that swans 'do bite, thorns do pierce' that suggests shifting meanings might, at times, be forced to solidify into the referential warnings of everyday life. This kind of obstruction to fluid perception is exemplified in the following line, which appears half-way through the previous poem 'Not Bad': 'Words forming bricks on this page before you'. The line suggests a calcifying of meaning that blocks wordplay and cuts off different ways of seeing, interrupting the play of shifting senses. The fear of retribution, is represented here as the bricks of incarceration; Mendelssohn is

suggesting that the risk of imprisonment itself causes blockages in the possibilities of perception, and that poetic meaning works to loosen such constraints, opening up meanings in the shifts between meanings. The kind of meanings that flutter or chime through Mendelssohn's texts expand our awareness of what is secreted between fixed poles of semantic sense, remaining both and neither, through a generative secreting that seeks to resist the repression of one way of seeing by another.

'[R]eally the law should not encroach | Upon poetry'

Like the entombed mummy, with its restricted flow of air, the sense of being linguistically bricked in recurs in this text as a touchstone for what is at stake in the potential entrapments of representation. The spectre of legal language is perceptible here, and the final page of the pamphlet elucidates the kinds of marks such modes of representation might imprint onto the living. Mendelssohn follows her poetry with a quoted passage about Apollinaire, who spent around a week in a Paris gaol in 1911 after being falsely accused of stealing a famous artwork along with some Ancient Egyptian artefacts from the Louvre. This text appears on the final page of the pamphlet:

Apollinaire's stay in prison left him for a long time with a feeling of terror, and we did our best as friends to help him get over it. He had become a public figure, but he had reached that position via the door that bears the inscription 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' He was marked for life, and even in the war, his courage, and his wound would never succeed in silencing certain persons who, out of ignorance, envy, stupidity, or self-interest, banded against him and continually attacked him as an artist...²⁰

Mendelssohn quotes the text without comment, leaving a reader to infer some parallels. Apollinaire suffered feelings of terror after being incarcerated for seven days; Mendelssohn spent about seven years in London's Holloway Prison, and the question of how this affected her remains only implicit. Mendelssohn, too, became a public figure initially on account of her trial and incarceration. The inscription

on the door (taken from the entrance to hell in Dante's *Inferno*) appears to mark Apollinaire for life as he passes through the doorway. This inscription brands the poet as a criminal and prison marks Apollinaire even more indelibly than his war wounds. Just as the language of the law can brick in the body of the prisoner, this doorway is inscribed with the law which writes itself upon the body of the accused citizen.

Indeed, the law inscribes itself upon the body non-figuratively: until very recently, UK laws were still written on vellum, the dried skin of a calf.²¹ A fragment of skin is written onto synecdochally, as the language of law enacts and embodies its own power. Mendelssohn's pamphlet is published on pale pink paper; the rosy tint of the skin of the poem, which sits at odds with an account of a mummified body, might rather be might be invoking the hue of vellum. In 1972, Mendelssohn's own body became the locus of this legal pressure: as Mendelssohn was in prison preparing for her own defence at the Angry Brigade trial she wrote, 'my body is suffering from [...] a variety of jigs/waltzes/minutes and jitterbugs...all as a result of hurried jabberings with lawyers'.²² It is as if her body instinctively reacts to the bodily restrictions of the judicial system with a rebellious form of dance. Justice was, for Mendelssohn, finally meted out in the physical constraint of incarceration.

About fifteen years after her release, Mendelssohn writes in a poem:

Having found no evidence
 Apart from Knowledge
 of my existence
 Which had been enough to convict me

 As well as everybody else [...]
 But write into the body of language –
 Don't write into me and if it's rotten to the core
 It is Literal the world beyond²³

Mendelssohn is explicitly rejecting the law scrawling its conviction on her, and she rejects too the rotten 'evidence' which emanated from her simply existing along

with other people. Rotten, too, is the assumption made through official modes of thinking that rely upon 'evidence' that language is literal and refers unproblematically to the 'world beyond'. The assumption of language's referentiality, its literality, is what enables language to be utilised as evidence and it is through this mode that the legal word writes into the body. In the poem 'friday', from Mendelssohn's *Implacable Art*, she explicates the difference between poetic and legal linguistic processes when she writes: 'really the law should not encroach | Upon poetry. It is a different voice that rakes embers for clues. | Poetry can be stripped'.²⁴ The law is figured as a voice that searches the ephemera of lived experience seeking clues: it is a particular mode of speaking, of representing and of reading. This approach that rakes embers for clues would also comb ashen hair for evidence and measure and weigh a poet's words.

Poetic difficulty is figured as oppositional to the modes of language deployed by the law, the police and the commodity. In Prynne's formulations about difficulty, we see the particularity of the extralinguistic world represented through impediment to literalism; for Mendelssohn this poetic work is a form of resistance and critique upon which the 'stripped' poem, and perhaps stripped poet, might depend. Linguistic difficulty, for Wittgenstein too, recognises the uncertainty and limit (rather than literalism) at the heart of language's communicative abilities: hence his reliance on nonsense – the unreadable – to forward philosophical thought, to complement clues and evidence.²⁵ It is in Mendelssohn's work that the political stakes of these kinds of reading practices becomes apparent.

Nonetheless, the poetic trail Mendelssohn leads her readers on requires a close attention that can feel perilously close to a kind of linguistic detective work. Mendelssohn often reiterates her position that such raking of embers for clues is not a poetic method, warning that: 'the police have nothing to do with poetry, nothing. And if | the police would have something to do with Poetry then let them give up | their jobs & forgo their privileges forever'.²⁶ Police methods and poetic methods are incompatible, yet a reader might sense uncomfortably that similarities between these reading methods persist, as if the reader is drawn into assessing a form of poetic evidence. If we follow Mendelssohn's thinking through *An Account*

of a *Mummy*, it is possible to discern how her careful methods of composition are designed to ensure that interpreting her work remains fundamentally oppositional to evidence gathering and its concomitant legalistic assumptions. Key to this code is risk.

'[B]reak[ing] through official language'

The final section of the Apollinaire material in *An Account of a Mummy* depicts the poet being 'continually attacked as an artist' because of his dealings with the law. This describes a kind of slippage from a legal attack on a person to legal and extra-legal attacks on the voice of the artist: a slippage which forms a common point of concern in Mendelssohn's work. This attack of the artistic via the legalistic is central to what is at stake in Mendelssohn's concern with representation, reading practices and their risks in this text. In a biographical note to accompany some of her work for a 1996 edited collection, Mendelssohn writes that her 'own poetry [was] seized' and her 'person threatened with strangulation';²⁷ the body and the voice of the poet is threatened by a powerful, hostile, seemingly legalistic force. Similarly, in her 1993 pamphlet *Viola Tricolor*, Mendelssohn writes of being 'fearful | to break through official language | being hounded by an agency'.²⁸ Breaking through official language is central to Mendelssohn's work, but the voice of the poet is continually under threat of being silenced. The density of poetic techniques employed in Mendelssohn's writing produces a kind of subterranean multivalent content in the poetry, which communicates through modes that circumvent and pressurise official discourse; the poetic breaking of official language expands what is linguistically communicable. In Mendelssohn's work this carries genuine risk, as she writes in *Implacable Art*, she 'plays real games with books'.²⁹ However, unlike the form of risk imposed by the law – which must atomise and isolate its subjects before it can mete out justice to individual bodies – the risk in Mendelssohn's work is, to an extent, shared: the breaking of official language is not only a mode of writing but is also figured as a mode of attention and a particular kind of reading.

The kinds of reading practices required to read *An Account of a Mummy* serve as examples. If we pay close attention to the front of the pamphlet – reproduced here

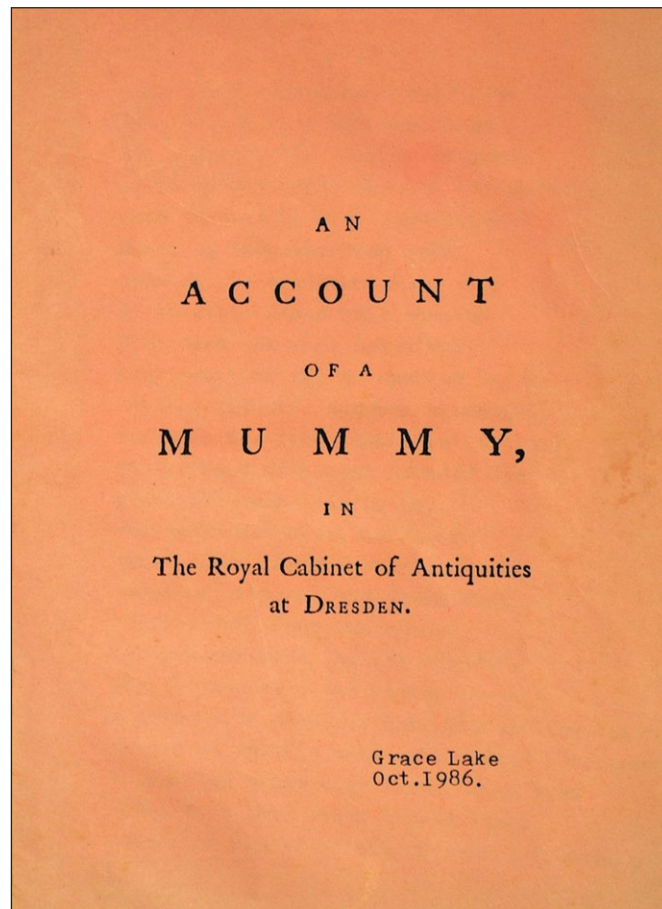


Figure 1: Front cover of *An Account of a Mummy, in The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden* by Grace Lake. Reproduced by kind permission of the Anna Mendelssohn Estate.

as **Figure 1** – we can see that the words ‘Grace Lake | Oct. 1986’ have been inserted on a typewriter. The body text within the pamphlet is in this same typewriter font throughout. Yet the title on the pamphlet’s cover is seemingly produced by a different writing technology: the spacing and typeface of the cover’s title look like text produced on an eighteenth-century printing press. Mendelssohn’s cover is, in fact, a reproduction of a title page from a different book. The title has been taken from the 1765 English translation of an essay by the pioneering German archaeologist who was instrumental in the founding of the discipline of art history,

Johann Joachim Winckelmann.³⁰ Winckelmann's original essay 'An Account of a Mummy, in The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden', begins like this: 'Among the Egyptian Mummies of the royal cabinet, there are two preserved perfectly entire, and not in the least damaged' he continues on to describe how one of the mummies 'among all those that were brought into and publicly known in Europe, is perhaps the only one of its kind; on account of an inscription thereon'.³¹ The remainder of Winckelmann's essay centres on that inscription; Winckelmann claims to demonstrate the authenticity of the inscription carved into the chest of the mummified body and offers an historical account of the possible origins of the mysterious writing, for which, he points out, 'no interpreter has yet been found'.³² This essay, like Mendelssohn's pamphlet, is profoundly interested in inscriptions – particularly on the body – and the question of how to read and decode their secrets.

Walter Benjamin was greatly influenced by Winckelmann and, in the *Arcades Project*, he describes Winckelmann's approach in terms of a particular mode of interpretation: 'in order to understand [...an artefact], the critic, the spectator, must effect within himself [*sic*] a mysterious transformation; and by means of a phenomenon of the will acting on the imagination, he must learn by himself to participate in the milieu which has given birth to [such an object]'.³³ For Benjamin, to be able to pay attention to the particularities of an (aesthetic) object, the critic must expose themselves to the possibility of being transformed by it. Critics must risk being marked by their object of study; they must risk its inscriptions. Attention so close that it can burn inscriptions into the reader is the opposite of the mode of attention that muckrakes through ashes. This form of inscription, in its difficulty – its resistance to form and content being elided in readability – is also fundamentally unlike the mark stamped into the commodity, such as the 'STAINLESS STEEL' stamped onto the shiny new poet whose mettle is weighed and measured by the market, and whose words will not be sifted through for evidence, as if being panned for gold. Prospectors seeking only to strip market value or incriminating evidence from Mendelssohn's poetry will find it resistant.

The complexity of the layers of meaning in Mendelssohn's work and her use of found text in *An Account of a Mummy* produces a palimpsest of reading methods, which in turn require a variety of strategies of decoding – but if the risk of what is at stake in Mendelssohn's writing is not shared in by the reader, we will not gain access to its meaning. Mendelssohn's poetry is resistant to an interrogatory mode, which she articulates in her poem 'friday': 'I have nothing to say to inquisitorial people'.³⁴ Sean Bonney, in his essay on Mendelssohn, puts it like this: 'In the face of those who would have "silenced" her, the response is to speak a language to which they have no access'.³⁵ Access is dependent upon taking the risk of wrong-stepping, of being accused, of having your perceptions shifted and of encountering meanings secreted in unreadability. To learn where Bernache Nonnette's nest might hide, you must prove that you mean her offspring no harm. The maternal sense of 'mummy', and the physical inscriptions made on the body by the processes of motherhood are also perceptible as models in this poetics: the 'mummy' here is gatekeeper and protector, and the feminine is neither reduced to decoration or synecdoche nor misrepresented as weapon. Bernache Nonnette's flight is also an allegory for a specifically aesthetic mode of resistance, traced through difficulty and opacity, in which the aesthetic secret is not exposed but remains meaningful in its unreadability, and thus resists being either stripped or filled with a false literalism.

Mendelssohn embeds her own poetics of reading into *An Account of a Mummy*, alongside her incorporation of found theories of reading, as in this passage which forms the middle section of 'Not Bad':

spread the spread,
glue the glue, [...] what's your clue?
words forming bricks on this page before you,
you the glass, you the push, you the lesion,
you two or four or twisted in rope on the floor

The tone shifts suddenly in this passage, and the sonic playfulness of the 'trailing day' and 'ashen hair grey' gives way to urgent metrical patterns, led by cretic and

iambic feet, alongside repetitions of vowel sounds, especially 'ou' and 'or', intoning the feeling of accusation, and evoking the play of wound/wound, which in turn links forwards to the twisted rope on the floor. The lines 'spread the spread, | glue the glue' also recall the wound/wound play structurally, as the same signifier shifts semantically between verb and noun here too, in a shifting of perspective. The lines: 'what's your clue? | words forming bricks on this page before you', implicate the reader, challenging us to find a way in to the poetry, questioning what clues we are following, and warning us, perhaps, that some modes of reading will reduce poetry to language that traps you in and shuts you out as words pile up. Another sense lurks, that when clues are sought, the ephemera of daily life become incriminating – as if the words 'spread' and 'glue' have gone into evidence bags with repetitive labels attached – and this mode of encountering words and objects can only leave you bricked in. Being unable to engage with poetic language, with its shifting perspectives, its sensitised difficulties and unreadabilities, is what leaves you entrapped in the end, as the poem materialises into a brick wall for those seeking to strip it. The gauze that sieves out value early on in the pamphlet tightens here, allowing only those to pass through who don't foreground the values of their own reading, encouraging us to encounter the words' multiple granularities; to encounter their risk, and their secret.

The 'glass' suggests the recurring figure of the window, and the response to the glass seems to become 'the push', as if the 'glass' is here serving as a barrier. The lines 'you the glass, you the push, you the lesion, | you two or four or twisted in rope on the floor' collapse the 'you' (perhaps the reader) into an object, the glass, then an action, push, and then another object, a wound. It's possible to infer causation here, although Mendelssohn's phrasing complicates the relationship between subject and object, confusing the perspective. The reader, the 'you', becomes these things and actions, allowing them to write themselves into the subject, in the same way that the reader risks being inscribed through Benjamin and Winkelmann's theories of reading. But Mendelssohn's context here adds another dimension of risk: of direct political risk through political action. The combination of glass, push and lesion along with the series of yous – which may be singular or plural, or

shiftingly both – and action which wholly defines its subject ('you the push') is also suggestive of violent protest and collective action. The exponentially multiplying 'you' (two, four) who risk the realities of ending up 'twisted in rope', incarcerated or perhaps wounded, forms another model of the sharing of risk. This kind of political risk is still intimately connected with the language of the poem, as these lines recall the 'trailing ribbons' and the wound/wound play, as well as the toppling towers of the window.

In the end, it is the words not the actions in this sequence which form the bricks ('words forming bricks') of incarceration. The language of the law sits behind collective action, breaking it up, in order to administer its atomising justice to each individual body. Mendelssohn knew what it was like to personally pay for collective action, to be a part taken for a whole. This passage is about forms of law-making violence that re-inscribe our relationship with the language of law. It generates a specifically aesthetic mode of resistance in which poetic evidence is unreadable to the law and the aesthetic secret of the poem remains beyond the law's understanding, which cannot tolerate its unreadability. The mode of reading that Mendelssohn seeks to produce in this pamphlet is a model: it is a way of reading through which the sharing of risk between the reader and the text means readers are willingly inscribed, and never forcibly marked, or marked out.

Competing Interests

Vicky Sparrow serves as Reviews Editor for the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*.

Notes

- ¹ Anna Mendelssohn, 'to any who want poems to give them answers', in *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Salt, 2000), p. 34.
- ² I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Jo L. Walton, Prof. Carol Watts, Dr. Jonathan Stafford and Dr. Peter Fifield for their generosity in reading and editing drafts of this article.
- ³ Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 297–360 (p. 351).
- ⁴ I am thinking particularly of the secret of the commodity fetish of course. See Karl Marx, 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof' in *Capital, Volume One*, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. by Frederick Engels, repr. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983), pp. 76–87.
- ⁵ Grace Lake, *Propaganda multi-billion bun* (Publisher unknown, 1985), p. 8.
- ⁶ My grateful thanks to the Anna Mendelssohn Estate, by whose kind permission I reproduce the front

cover and sections of the text from this pamphlet. My sincere thanks also to Prof. Sara Crangle for her careful assistance in arranging these permissions on my behalf.

- ⁷ My thanks to Peter Manson, who discerns references to the work of Paul Celan here. 'Ashen hair' is found in Celan's 'Todesfuge', and Mendelssohn's insistent repetition of 'air' in this context also brings to mind Celan's 'grave in the air' image, from the same poem. See: 'Todesfuge' in *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 2002), pp. 30–33. Mendelssohn's setting of this pamphlet in Dresden further suggests the Second World War and its atrocities. This astute reading adds another layer of interpretation to the work, and serves to emphasise the complexity of Mendelssohn's writing and the inevitable partiality of the arguments I make here.
- ⁸ J.H. Prynne, 'Difficulties in the Translation of "Difficult" Poems', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1.3 (2010), 151–66 (p. 156).
- ⁹ J.H. Prynne, 'Resistance and Difficulty', *Prospect*, 5 (1961), 26–30 (p. 30).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Grace Lake, *Propaganda multi-billion bun*, p. 8.
- ¹³ Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Les Fenêtres', in *Calligrammes: Poems of War and Peace (1913–1916)*, trans. by Anne Hyde Greet, repr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) pp. 26–29. Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé's poems of the same name may also be relevant here: all three poems contain meditations on shifting perspectives between inside and outside across the central figure of a window, combined with detailed, compassionate descriptions of ordinary people.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Edward Heron-Allen, *Barnacles in Nature and Myth*, repr. (Montana: Kessinger, 2003), pp. 11–12.
- ¹⁵ Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache nonnette*, by Grace Lake', *Angel Exhaust*, 15 (1997), 105–110 (p. 105).
- ¹⁶ Anna Mendelssohn, 'Art made', *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Salt, 2000), p. 42.
- ¹⁷ When Marx writes that the 'commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties', he is describing its apparent readability: its appearance dissembles easy legibility in order to conceal the secrets of the exploitation of labour by its production. In reading Marx, we learn to read the commodity. See Marx, *Capital*, p. 76.
- ¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. Anscombe, ed. by G. Anscombe and R. Rhees, rev. edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), pp. 193–200.
- ¹⁹ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time Volume I*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff, ed. by William C. Carter, repr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 153.
- ²⁰ Mendelssohn cites this text as being by André Billy, in the journal 'Les Soirées de Paris'. The passage is in fact from Billy's book on Apollinaire, *Apollinaire Vivant* (Paris: Éditions de La Sirène, 1923), pp. 39–40; the English translation reproduced in *An Account of a Mummy* matches that in Francis Steegmuller's biography, *Apollinaire: Poet Among the Painters* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1963), p. 230. Mendelssohn could have borrowed the 1964 edition of Steegmuller's book from the University Library at Cambridge.
- ²¹ Set to change to archive paper bound in vellum in 2017.
- ²² Anna Mendelssohn, *Conspiracy Notes Issue 1*, Jan 1972, p. 19.
- ²³ Grace Lake, 'fragment; redundance; wordsworth.' *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue* (Cambridge: Involution, 1996), unpaginated.
- ²⁴ Anna Mendelssohn, 'friday', *Implacable Art*, p. 31.
- ²⁵ I am thinking of Tractarian nonsense here. For a useful account of Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy's connections with difficult poetry, see John Gibson, 'What Makes a Poem Philosophical?'

in *Wittgenstein and Modernism* ed. by Michael Lemahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 130–50, as well as Marjorie Perloff's seminal account, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁶ Grace Lake, 'A grace note', *Tondo Aquatique* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997), unpaginated.

²⁷ Grace Lake, biographical note, in *Conductors of Chaos*, ed. by Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996), p. 184.

²⁸ Grace Lake, 'on challenge, positive attitudes and "les peintres cubistes"', *Viola Tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993), unpaginated.

²⁹ Anna Mendelssohn, 'Naturalia', *Implacable Art*, p. 133.

³⁰ An original copy of the 1765 translation of Johann Joachim Winkelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, which contains the essay 'An Account of a Mummy, in The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden', is held at the University Library in Cambridge. This is very likely the copy from which Mendelssohn would have reproduced the page, as her status as an undergraduate English student at Cambridge in 1986 would have granted her access to the UL's collections.

³¹ Johann Joachim Winkelmann, 'An Account of a Mummy, in The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden', in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, trans. by Henry Fusseli (London: printed for the translator, 1765), pp. 127–42 (p. 129).

³² *ibid.* p. 141.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 200.

³⁴ Anna Mendelssohn, 'friday', *Implacable Art*, p. 31.

³⁵ Sean Bonney, "'Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform" – Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 226 (2011), 17–19 (p. 19).

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