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ARTICLE

## Fear of Retribution

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This article begins with a personal account of Anna Mendelssohn and her work, recalled against the backdrop of student demonstrations in Cambridge and elsewhere across the UK in 2010–11. Using an idea drawn from the art historian Lisa Tickner (via the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott), it tries to take on the challenge of writing 'good-enough history'. Through a reading of the poem 'from. Implacable Art', I consider Mendelssohn's own involvement with student activism at Essex University in 1968. I conclude by exploring the limitations of Winnicott's work, citing the work of Mendelssohn's contemporaries, Juliet Mitchell and Denise Riley. What kind of approach does Mendelssohn's work invite? What kind of approach does it disqualify? These are the questions my essay explores.

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**Keywords:** Anna Mendelssohn; May 1968; University of Essex; Poetry and the Police; Poetry and Protest

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I didn't know her, but I used to see Anna Mendelssohn in the Cambridge University Library. Always at the same desk, at the top of the North Wing corridor, between the courtyard, the Map Room, and the tearoom. Anna sat opposite a painting of a destroyer at sea, which when I picture now I think of as blue-green and grey, with wisps of white clouds above and surf below surrounding the ship. When I picture Anna she's writing, fierce and protective, and she's looking up and I catch her eye.

But this is a fantasy of recognition.

Sam Ladkin gave me her address, and I wrote to her to ask for poems for a magazine I had started, because in Cambridge at that time it seemed like starting a magazine was how you got to be a poet. As Anna says in *Bernache Nonnette*: 'Xerox it!'. I sent her some of my own poems, my first real poems, and I'm embarrassed now to think of how I might have addressed her, how I must have blended the act of asking her for her work with my own desire for legitimation. I didn't know her, and I

don't even think I knew then that she had a *history*. This was 2007, 2008, and I didn't know enough about the 1970s, about politics, about feminism, or the law, to be able to place Anna as anything other than a poet, sitting at a desk at the same library I occasionally had reason to go to.

Anna died in November 2009, and I came back to Cambridge in October 2010. We were almost immediately thrown into student revolt. It's hard to write an impassive timeline of these events, because my fidelity to the experience still determines my feelings. The newly elected Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition tabled proposals for a massive increase in University tuition fees and the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, a grant that enabled working-class school students to continue their studies. These policies were an aggressive and successful attempt to enshrine the logic of market competition in the education system. They were also the warning shots for the implementation of austerity measures, which have since 2010 enacted systematic and punitive cuts to the state provision of welfare and public services. At a demonstration called by the National Union of Students on November 10<sup>th</sup> – almost exactly a year after Mendelssohn's death – a crowd stormed the headquarters of the Conservative Party at Millbank. Subsequent protests in London were met with ferocious police violence. There were waves of student occupations around the country. For stretches of days and weeks, it felt like the government might be forced to capitulate, and that this capitulation might even lead to the government's collapse. Thinking back to this period I often forget that it happened before the Arab Spring and before Occupy. While the education policies were passed in Parliament on December 9<sup>th</sup>, the atmosphere of revolt continued through to the riots in London in summer 2011 and after.<sup>2</sup> In Cambridge there were protests that autumn against a visit by David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science. His speech was disrupted by the reading of a call-and-response text, widely described in the media at the time as a poem. For me the final event of this particular arc was a large demonstration in March 2012, when Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the IMF and indicted on a sexual assault charge, was invited by right-wing students to speak at the Union Debating Society. Soon after I moved to Brighton with another poet, and here my timeline diverges.

Within these interlocking structures of confrontation there were about two-dozen of us who were seriously interested in poetry, and Anna was one of the poets we were interested in. She was part of the texture of the time. We knew she had published a handful of chapbooks under the pseudonym Grace Lake in the 1990s, which we read in the library. We had copies of her full-length book *Implacable Art*. We knew she had been involved with the anarchist political group the Angry Brigade, and we knew she had spent time in prison, though the dates were vague. The slightly older poets who had personal relationships with Anna guarded her secrets and respected her privacy. For those of us who had only known her at a distance, or wanted to have known her, or felt that we could know her through the work, she was a figure shrouded in mystery, danger, and glamour. At the library, the desk where she used to sit was called Anna's desk, and sometimes we'd sit there, hoping to benefit from the memory of her intensity. Books from her personal collection ended up at a stall on the market, and you might show up at the library with Anna's copy of Dryden, only to find that someone else held a rarer prize, like Anna's copy of Laura Riding.

The legal ramifications of the protests we were involved in dragged out for months and months, for years. The personal ramifications – what it did to our social life, to our poetry, to the way we are with each other – are still unfolding. Our conversations were punctuated by news of trials, our horizons shaped by court cases and witness statements. Everyone knew someone who was on trial for something. I internalised at least one line of Anna's poetry, taking it as both truth and demand: 'I don't talk to the police except never.'<sup>3</sup> As we learned more of her history, she felt more and more like a contemporary, a peer.

Becoming a poet during a time of intense political excitement brings with it certain complications. The demand to give up poetry for activism, or to devote your poetry to a radical cause is well-worn. But to face this dilemma (or we might say to have it framed *as* a dilemma) before you've even started makes the unfamiliar territory more hazardous. I'm certain that Anna Mendelssohn wrote poems throughout her life, but she only became a poet after the huge drama of her life was over. I mean that after her trial and imprisonment, Anna wanted only to be a poet and an artist. But this

statement makes me uncertain: the huge drama of her life never really ended, and I didn't know her, so how can I make such pronouncements. But we learned through conversation and stories that after her release she had been wary of politics and political activism of any kind. Reading her as a contemporary sometimes meant overlooking this. Sean Bonney, during the thrill of the first waves of marches in London, wrote that it's tempting but mistaken to view Mendelssohn's work 'as a continuation of left-wing politics by other means'.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to detail the quality of confrontation and refusal that animates her poetry, signing off with the gift she offers us: 'a poem of objects that live by magic.'<sup>5</sup> Reading her now, I'm interested in the moments where she seems to draw away from the world of politics and police, and tries to construct or protect the world of poetry. In trying to separate these two spheres she gives us a diagram of their relation. She shows us how one moves into the other, a hard lesson of inextricability and suffering.

Let me illustrate these complications, by which I mean most of all a kind of awkwardness. One of the first things you might do when you're trying to be a poet is to negotiate your own earnestness: you want, at least, to make an object of your sincerity, to treat it with some kind of intelligence and sophistication. But student activism troubles this. What could be more earnest than a student occupation? My most vivid memories of the occupation at Cambridge in winter 2010 are of standing outside, on guard at the door in case the University security or bailiffs came to eject us. I liked this job because it indulged my aloofness, but it also meant that I got to know people coming in and out. I remember one night in the snow, hiding behind a giant urn outside the Old Schools Building with a megaphone and Justin Katko. Justin read Edward Dorn's 'Thesis' to the deserted streets, and we heard lone applause from a distant open window. 'Only the illegitimate are beautiful,' wrote Dorn and said Justin, and so it was.<sup>6</sup> One day inside the building we were sitting around and a child was walking through the forty or fifty students who made up the occupation. At one point he shouted: 'I want to stay here and do nothing! Destroy everyone's work!', lines which Justin would later work into a poem.<sup>7</sup> We loved this moment of refusal most of all. It was confusing because we didn't know if the child was speaking to us or for us. It was liberating because while we were storing up all this experience for poems, the child beat us at our own game.

After the protests died down and during the long repercussions I sometimes felt like the child whenever I was in discussion with poets about politics. Better to refuse and reject, better to do nothing than to carry on as if we'd mastered or even understood what we'd been through. Even if the distinction between the world of poetry and the world of politics is a false one, there's something painful about the return to order and routine. The lost moment of rebellion was the real order, and the time afterwards felt empty. However much we could will it in seminars or in private and public arguments, the political vector of poetry is determined by the social moment in which it's written, if it gets written at all. And in this way, I came to appreciate Anna's protectiveness, her secrecy, how her anonymous honesty calls for more poetry, more writing, more art, implacable.

This personal account risks a kind of sentimental embarrassment, both on my part and the people who I imagine reading it. I've used a collective pronoun here recklessly, because it's the only adequate one: the memory of crowds, passionate conversation, and violent scenes of protest is never singular. But the judgements and reflections are my own experience, the squeamishness my own, also. But I attempt this narrative because I've been thinking about something the art historian Lisa Tickner writes in a footnote to her book about the occupation of Hornsey College of Art in 1968. Tickner, who participated in the unrest, says she wants to write 'good enough history', she wants to be 'impelled by the investments of the present but not disabled by them'.<sup>8</sup> What is good enough history? Tickner's elaboration is tantalisingly brief. It seems to be a way of acknowledging personal investment in the material under discussion while allowing that material a life of its own. Rather than studied neutrality, good enough history can be a method of open and self-reflexive mediation. Perhaps, in literary studies, we can think of good enough history as a cousin or a sister to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, which I'll come back to over the course of this essay. Tickner's wonderful study of her 1968 involves meticulous archival work and reconstruction. She offers interpretation rather than anecdote. But the events that she writes about are older than the events I write about: the dust has settled. Where May 1968 is understood as an epoch-making political and cultural event, November 2010 remains half-formed. My archive of the

recent past is dozens and dozens of poetry pamphlets, held together by the scattered network of those who were there at the time. What was in public circulation retreats, ready or not yet ready for study.

In the world of the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, 'the good-enough mother' is essential to the maturation of the infant, and to the psychic well-being of the baby. The good-enough mother, in Winnicott's account, *knows what to do*: she doesn't need specialist information or unnecessary advice from neighbours, though the reassurances of a qualified physician may be helpful.<sup>9</sup> Here's what Winnicott says:

The good-enough 'mother' (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptations to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration.<sup>10</sup>

So one thing the good-enough mother must do is to temporarily suppress her psychic life, or rather, make her psychic life coincide with that of the baby. This is what he defines later as the work of 'primary maternal preoccupation'.<sup>11</sup> Through this easy natural bond, sustained and eventually rescinded as an act of devotion, the baby will come to learn the differences between self and other, and establish for itself the shape and tenor of reality. This is another type of separation, different to that of poetry and politics. The practice of historical inquiry doesn't map onto this theory in any exact way: the historian who practices good enough history is neither the baby nor the mother, though she was once *a* baby and may well be *a* mother. We'll return to the figure of the mother at the conclusion of this essay to discuss its limitations.

Mendelssohn's life and poetry pose distinct difficulties to literary criticism. These include problems in appellation and attribution (her use of pseudonyms); in textuality (the sheer density of allusion and joyful détournement); in dating both manuscripts and published work; and of understanding Mendelssohn's relationships to her editors, including Rod Mengham, Alastair Horne, and Peter Hughes. This is to say nothing of the ideological decisions that the work confronts us with. With the accession of her archive to Sussex University, there are now great advancements in our understanding thanks to scholarly work by Sara Crangle, Eleanor Careless, Vicky

Sparrow, Jordan Savage, and others. Some of the mysteries are beginning to be solved. But as Samuel Solomon has recently written, explaining her omission from his book *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism*, 'her relationship to feminism is ambivalent, at best'.<sup>12</sup> So too is her relationship to psychoanalysis. In her final published work she describes 'every other day|socking it to Oedipus', and to read back across her work would furnish many other examples.<sup>13</sup> But the purpose of this essay is to stay with those ambivalences.

I should be careful to emphasize here that Winnicott's focus on the infant's relationship to the mother, following and modifying Melanie Klein, has at times provided tactical room for manoeuvre for feminist writers.<sup>14</sup> Throughout Winnicott's writing, he stresses the importance of keeping his concepts and terminology open to interpretation and transformation.<sup>15</sup> If he's vague, his vagueness is a kind of generosity, so when I speak of 'good enough history' it's better to be imprecise rather than attempt to prematurely codify or systematize. Political commitment complicates all of this and leaves me uncertain. There's a risk that the transposition of the idea of adaption to reality – the necessary disillusionment that the good-enough mother instigates in the infant – will emerge in writing as full-fledged disenchantment. The 'adaptation to reality', in a different context, is a familiar refrain of conservative quietism. But what Lisa Tickner is describing, I think, is how to meet the peculiar frustrations that arise when one's own experiences become historical experiences. You may be aware of this process happening at the time, in the sudden shock of agency in the street or the square. You may be aware also of the distortions when they arrive at a later date. The pressurised local movements of political antagonism often involve substantial personal cost. By departing from the fiction of objectivity, we risk becoming blunt accountants of difficult feelings. So you adapt to the necessity of self-scrutiny, and try to prepare the conditions in which history can stand on its own two feet, if only to be turned on its head.

In one important elaboration of Winnicott's theories concerning the maternal aesthetic and language acquisition, Christopher Bollas writes that the good-enough mother can establish 'generative transformations of internal and external realities'.<sup>16</sup> And one of the things Anna Mendelssohn's poetry does – and sometimes undoes or



undermines – is to instigate something like this relationship. Sometimes I feel like I have to brave it with Anna, called on by the language to make deep interior connections, to make historical associations take shape in forms that both promise freedom and repeatedly withdraw that promise. The moment of aesthetic absorption, something like recognition or intimacy, is violated. Reading Anna Mendelssohn's poetry often makes me feel clumsy, like I'm trespassing in someone else's carefully arranged environment. I feel like I'll knock over the language, that I'll hear something I shouldn't have heard. That I'll be thrown out of the world of art, where internal and external reality can be examined and enjoyed and pleurably tested, where unspoken rules can emerge and dissolve. What I'm trying to describe is the feeling of guilt; or more-or-less precisely, what Mendelssohn calls elsewhere *the fear of retribution*.<sup>17</sup> But it's something more than that: within the circuit of retribution I will be identified as one of the 'civilian detectives' who invade the house in *Viola Tricolor*.<sup>18</sup> That's to say, I will be the unwitting agent of retribution rather than its focus.

What I've just described shares some terrain with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's famous essay 'Paranoid and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You'.<sup>19</sup> Again, the mapping isn't exact. Reading and living with poetry is, I would like to think, a distinct mesh of temporal problems and units of feeling and experience. The context of Sedgwick's essay – a foundational text for Queer Theory, an intervention into critical debate, a profound reflection on the AIDS crisis – has its own contours and its own rich and complex history. But Sedgwick's terms are helpful for the reader of Anna Mendelssohn, or at least this reader of Anna Mendelssohn. Sedgwick's essay draws directly (and indirectly) on the work of Winnicott's analyst, mentor, and sometimes-adversary Melanie Klein. For Klein, we develop over the course of our infancies two 'positions', which we oscillate between throughout our lives. The first is the paranoid-schizoid position, which is the earliest strategy for coping with the negative experiences and destructive impulses she believes to be innate. It works as a kind of defence mechanism, where objects are split into good and bad and are then held apart for fear that their contamination will lead to the destruction of both the object and the self. We can also, Klein believes, fragment an object into many parts in order to mitigate the threat that the object

represents. Although this sounds desperate and pessimistic, it's also a means of keeping open the possibility of relation. The paranoid-schizoid position is a way of withstanding unbearable feelings of destructiveness and persecution. The counterpart to this, and what Klein says is the most important aspect of our development, is the depressive position. The depressive position is the domain of guilt, where we can recognise our culpability for what has been lost or destroyed in fantasy, and we can begin to integrate the twin impulses of hatred and love into a whole sense of self and other. For Klein, these fundamental processes are a type of structural equipment for surviving intolerable ambivalence. This is the ongoing and fragile work of reparation. The figure that has to withstand all of this, apart from the baby itself, is of course the baby's mother.

In Sedgwick's late work, written after her diagnosis with breast cancer, depressive or reparative reading emerges as a volatile practice of ethical engagement. Privileging surprise, uncertainty, and mistakes over mastery and suspicion, it gives permission to surrender critical distance and to acknowledge how involved we might be in the work that we read. If, as Sedgwick argues, the 'reparative impulse' is surrounded by a culture that is 'inadequate or inimical to its nurture', this form of relation might be – at its outer limit or inner core – a matter of survival.<sup>20</sup> As a kind of elaborated close reading, the reparative provides an approach to marginalised or damaged texts, works that have been produced under conditions of violence and surveillance, lives that have been interrupted and lost. Anna Mendelssohn was twenty-three when she went on trial as part of the Stoke Newington Eight. She spent five years in prison, and on her release was hounded by the tabloid press. Later in life, her position as a mother was subject to legal and juridical intervention and she was unable to keep custody of her children. The state did not judge her to be a 'good-enough mother'. So there is an undeniable bitterness in bringing to this work the metaphorical framework of psychoanalysis, especially the psychological mechanism of guilt, given Mendelssohn's experience of punishment at the hands of the state. We encounter these poems only after the terms of reparation have been pulverized by incarceration. The manageable scale of the poem and person unravels in the face of the machinations of the courtroom and cell. And yet my experience of these poems

is one where the reparative, against all odds, is maintained. The reader is invited to withstand dread, suspicion, aggression, and to discover creativity, resistance, even joy. We are always allowed back.

Here's an example of one of Mendelssohn's more amenable poems, which appears early on in her only widely-available collection, *Implacable Art*:

from. Implacable Art

In unlike minds soft verdancy  
reconnoîtred for barrack room politics

.....  
.....

When the fat coca-cola man lands  
on you in the night, fling open  
the shutters and yell for Paint,  
Sheet metal, burin & copper wire.<sup>21</sup>

This poem has been familiar to me for a long time, but I can never remember it quite correctly. From the title onwards, it seems like something has been redacted. The poem is called 'from. Implacable Art' and it's in a book called *Implacable Art*: is this an excerpt from what would be the title-sequence? Or does all of Mendelssohn's work go under the heading and sign of implacability? The opening couplet presents a kind of military exercise. The minds are the opposite of 'likeminded', so we expect that these minds – however many of them there are – will diverge on matters of taste, perhaps to disagree more seriously. I read the 'soft verdancy' as shared but unstable ground. The 'verdancy' is already suspect, too poetic, almost arch. Because the verdancy is soft, it's pliable: but when has anything verdant truly been hard? This material, both the unlike minds and the soft verdancy is 'reconnoîtred': it's being, or has already been, scoped out for military purposes. I imagine someone in fatigues watching the minds from a distance through binoculars, blending into the scenery. We move from the green shade into the barrack room, where politics takes place. It's unclear whether this has already happened, or is yet to happen, or simply might

happen as one possibility among many. But *something* happens in the following two lines of ellipses.

Where do these dots come from? They remind me of the presentation of Rimbaud's early poems, where missing text and skips in the narrative are indicated in this way. Take for example 'La Forgeron', or 'The Blacksmith' one of his last experiments in Victor Hugo-inspired realism. The majority of this poem is a monologue, spoken by the title character, who confronts Louis XVI at The Palace of Tuileries, 'about August 10 92', as the poem tells us. He passionately justifies the destruction of the Bastille, and describes taking to the streets armed with his work-tools to defend and further the revolution. The first sequence of dots occurs in the following lines:

Waving our bugles and oakleaves,  
 With pikes in our hands; we had no hate,  
 – We felt so strong, we wanted to be gentle!  
 .....  
 .....  
 "And since that day, we have been like madmen!"<sup>22</sup>

The poem exonerates and celebrates the workers, and ends with the Blacksmith defiantly throwing his *bonnet rouge* at the King's head. For Jacques Rancière it is 'the poem of the century, the poem of the people, of the worker, of poverty and of revolution'.<sup>23</sup> I don't think it's far-fetched to introduce Rimbaud's aporia into the aporia in 'from. Implacable Art'. I want to suggest that these dots, both in Rimbaud's poem and in Mendelssohn's, stand for revolution itself. More specifically, they stand for the question of revolutionary violence. The terms for each poet are different: Rimbaud's formal breakthroughs will allow him, during and after the Paris Commune, to write the fabled poetry of the future. He will, in the poems to come, fill in the gaps. But for Mendelssohn, writing in the long aftermath of the violence she was judged to be in proximity of, the ellipsis indicates what still can't be said. Her use of language is conditioned by the experience of arrest, trial, and imprisonment. There is nothing to say about revolutionary violence; there is everything to say about revolutionary violence.

Mendelssohn was a student at the University of Essex in 1968, when Essex erupted into student protest and activism. In February, a visit by the racist Conservative MP Enoch Powell was resisted by hundreds of students; disciplinary actions were halted by a sit-in. The University continued its controversial invitations to visiting speakers by hosting scientists from Porton Down in May. In his account of the events, David Triesman describes Porton Down as 'the germ warfare establishment on Salisbury Plain'.<sup>24</sup> There was already an anti-Vietnam War campaign at Essex, which Mendelssohn was involved in. But the visit by the Military to the University came just a few days after the events in Paris at Nanterre and the Sorbonne that would escalate into a General Strike. At Essex, three students were suspended following the demonstration, leading to a mass student occupation and the declaration of the Free University. Among other things, these protests led to the departure of Donald Davie, who had set up the Literatures Department only three years previously, for Stanford in the United States. In his memoirs he skips over the condition of his exile, noting only sourly in the final sentence that he's left out 'variously frenzied people known in Essex in the 1960s'.<sup>25</sup> The story of Essex Poetry, including Davie, Dorn, Tom Clark, Tom Raworth, Douglas Oliver, and later Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, Ralph Hawkins, and many others, will have to wait for another time. I want briefly to follow how these events impacted on Mendelssohn, before returning to the second part of 'from. Implacable Art'.

In the burgeoning underground press, the role of students within revolutionary struggle was a much-discussed topic. The front cover of the influential socialist newspaper *Black Dwarf* in July 1968 featured an enormous splash headline reading: 'STUDENTS: THE NEW REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD'.<sup>26</sup> In her memoirs, the feminist historian and activist Sheila Rowbotham – an editor and contributor – describes how this issue moved her to despair: 'I sat on a pile of papers in the *Dwarf* office and wept. I couldn't abide vanguards. Tariq [Ali] maintained that the designer had forgotten to put in a question mark'.<sup>27</sup> Issues that followed detailed the student unrest at Hull and at the LSE, and discussed the possibility of founding 'Campus Soviets'. These claims for the potential of student vanguardism were not entirely without merit. Between 1945 and 1964, student numbers in Britain had doubled, and by 1972 had doubled

again to around 600,000.<sup>28</sup> But if they were to become the revolutionary vanguard, these students would have to dissolve the University itself, to reject the terms of the education it presented, and to abolish 'the student' as a social category.<sup>29</sup> The events in Paris – which Mendelssohn attended with a cohort from Essex, including Ed Dorn – had shown that student protest could present the conditions for a revolutionary situation. Mendelssohn, like many others involved in political activism at the time, refused to take her finals and dropped out. For an idea of how common this was, the events diary in the summer issues of *Black Dwarf* featured an icon of a calendar with 'FINALS' crossed out and 'BOYCOTT' inserted, along with a reminder to attend student meetings.

In a late unpublished poem, Mendelssohn writes disparagingly about the culture around *Black Dwarf*. It appears to be a self-portrait of the artist, described at first as a 'Lazy socialiste|A Lazy Lady Socialiste', then 'Oh parasite poetess', 'problematic dreamy poetess', and as a 'mild-mannered swot'. The poem continues:

She had been asked to leave  
 a 'Black Dwarf' household  
 for writing, and folding poems  
 in her blue satin jeans  
  
 escorted to a more suitable household  
 that's where they got her – There.<sup>30</sup>

After leaving Essex, Mendelssohn lived in radical squats in London, ending up at the Amhurst Road address where she was arrested in 1971 and charged with conspiracy to cause explosions. I want to take seriously the accusation she makes in the poem. It suggests that she came to believe that the attitude revolutionary socialists took to her poetry led to her persecution by the State. I'm not interested here in passing any sort of judgement on the methods of the Angry Brigade; I'm interested in the judgement Mendelssohn makes about the trajectory her life took after University. Wanting to be gentle, she finds that *she* is the one who has been 'reconnoîtréd for barrack room politics'. In 'from. Implacable Art' it's the barrack room and the recon-

noitring that are cause for alarm, rather than politics as such. Viewed in any light, Mendelssohn's work is resolutely political: she writes ferociously against domination, against power, against historical injustice. But she also struggles against other people's ideas about politics, about having politics thrust on her, of being used or otherwise exploited. The closest comparison I can think of is something Alice Notley says in *Tell Me Again*: 'The only real politics I have is write my poems and destroy anyone who tries to keep me from it'.<sup>31</sup>

The final quatrain of 'from. Implacable Art' reads at first something like an uneasy punch-line. The 'fat coca-cola man' sounds comical: I think of the Coca-Cola Father Christmas dropping out of the sky. But the image changes: it happens in the night, and it happens in textual proximity to what we're told is a barrack room. Recalling the formative context of the Vietnam War, perhaps behind the sickly-sweet appearance of the 'coca-cola man' lies the weight of U.S. imperialism. The joke isn't funny. The man landing on you in the middle of the night reads like an attempted assault, like that which some scholars identify in Rimbaud's 'Le Coeur Volé', or 'The Stolen Heart'.<sup>32</sup> Mendelssohn presents this either as inevitability or likelihood: '*When the fat coca-cola man lands|on you in the night*'. Within the world of male-dominated revolutionary politics of the 1960s, the threat of gendered violence is ever-present. Her following advice is to 'fling open|the shutters and yell for Paint,|Sheet metal, burin & copper wire'. These are the artist's materials and tools. Mendelssohn's advice, at least in this poem, is to resist assaults on the self by means of art. What's moving about this poem is that she asks for assistance. Anybody could be on the other side of the window; who knows what the shutter might open on to. In the act of publishing her work in a widely available volume, she lets strangers in to the guarded room. As the first poem following the title page, she presents the reader with her life's dilemma: what to do when the possibility for political commitment has been taken away, has already been sacrificed.

But the poem remains inscrutable, full of residues that don't entirely add up. I want to try reading this poem more literally, and I imagine that it's an *image* of the 'fat coca-cola man' that falls from the wall in the middle of the night, and could be hung back up with the copper wire, the plaster painted over. But I remain over-vigilant: after all, this is a poem about waking up in alarm in the middle of the night.

What's the sheet metal for? Are these the bedsheets, transformed now into something harder? I can't help but hear the police in the '*copper wire*', and even start hearing 'pain' in 'Paint', a slip of the key. The turn to art keeps turning back to the experience of incarceration. The flinging open of the shutters is the corollary of the cell-door being shut behind us. The alarm subsides, we start our reading again.

The difference between 1968 and 2010 is that we were neither offered nor won the mass support of organized labour. We found it hard to extend our demands to the abolition of the University and the transcendence of the category of the student because we were stuck trying to salvage these things. The campaign in Cambridge went under the heading of Defend Education, and while it was possible to go on the offence, it was only possible to go so far and no further. Rather than boycotting finals, many of us were embarking on PhDs, already saddled with undergraduate debts from the fees introduced by New Labour. Maybe this makes me a bad reader of Mendelssohn's work, testing her scepticism of revolutionary politics against my untested enthusiasm for revolutionary politics. But of course, circumstances change, and the legacy of the recent student movement remains to be told and honoured. I encountered Anna Mendelssohn's work in a period of open and sustained State repression and violence. Or rather, my encounter with Mendelssohn's work coincided with the moment where, from my position of privilege, I was made aware of what State violence sometimes looks and feels like. And I encounter it and continue to encounter it from within the scholastic part of the State apparatus, the University we defended in the snow. It's in this juncture, or at this crux, that the need for 'good enough history' seems to get more difficult, and where I'd like to think further about Winnicott and Sedgwick.

There are a series of significant feminist readings of Winnicott's theory that I'd like to outline before bringing this essay to a close. In the early 1970s, Juliet Mitchell argued that developments at the Tavistock Institute during World War II produced a 'heritage of mother-child obsession'. She goes on:

It does not amount to an estimation of the intrinsic merits or otherwise of the work if one points out that the development of child psychoanalysis contributed very neatly to the political demands of the epoch.<sup>33</sup>



The disturbances to the family unit in war-time, the mass entrance of women into the workforce, and the accompanying state provision of childcare, was met with a theory in which the mother, if she was to be good-enough, remained in the home. The heteronormative family unit was to be preserved as the foundation of capitalist social reproduction. Denise Riley's *War In The Nursery*, based on articles and research undertaken in the late 1970s and early 1980s, refines and extends Mitchell's critique. Riley's meticulous study traces the points where social policy, psychology, and psychoanalysis overlapped, examining the emergence of pre-war, wartime, and post-war theories of the child and mother. Rather than claiming, as Mitchell does in the passage above, a direct contribution to the interests of the State, she focuses on how these ideas were disseminated and popularised. She emphasises moments of friction and contestation, and offers a materialist history of the regulating discourses surrounding and producing the mother and the child. What were their origins? What were their limits? What kinds of division did they perpetuate or obscure? At the risk of oversimplification, Mitchell's Lacanian account at times seems to suggest that psychoanalytic theory is one thing, and what the State does with that theory is another thing. Riley's work shows that this isn't the case: the two are too finely inter-related to hold apart in any clean separation. This is salutary, because it can be tempting – especially when thinking about confrontation with the police and the experience of incarcerated subjects – to think of the State as the fundamental origin of power, domination, and authority. In the situations I started this essay with, the State often looks like a monolithic expression of dominant class interests, a blunt instrument of repression, *and that alone*, rather than the whole set of jostling social relations that it constitutes. The moving parts of the whole are rendered static: the State, the Family, the Mother, all of these definite articles loom large while the needs of real mothers, waged or unwaged, single or otherwise, are effaced and forgotten.<sup>34</sup> As Riley concludes: 'Great intricacies are wrapped up in the bland package labelled "motherhood"; stubborn and delicate histories, wants and attributions are concealed in it'.<sup>35</sup>

Winnicott's conceptualisation of the good-enough mother indeed conceals much. Perhaps the idea of 'good enough history' itself does more harm than good,

working as an additional layer of mystification. In the considerably less nuanced work of Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, published in the early 1990s, Winnicott is more strongly identified as reactionary. His modification of Klein works to subdue the mother, creating a hierarchy within the mother-infant dyad in which the Mother is always the subordinate partner. Winnicott not only 'naturalizes women's submission', but works to 'hide his own efforts to enforce their submission'.<sup>36</sup> Like Riley, Doane and Hodges are interested in how the ideas of the Independent Group of British psychoanalysts became popularized. Through his talks on the BBC and his albeit sceptical relationship with the NHS, Winnicott was involved in the more innocuous elements of the British State. Yet to bring even a shadow of the good-enough mother in the guise of good enough history to Anna Mendelssohn's work is a fraught proposition. For the mother subject to incarceration, Winnicott's idea of the 'holding environment' brings with it uneasy connotations, to say nothing of his ideas about stealing; and his studies of social delinquency align him with the social worker who is forever being expelled from Mendelssohn's creative sanctuary.<sup>37</sup> As I have said, Mendelssohn's motherhood was subject to extreme intervention by the State and social services, which runs as a profound wound throughout her writing. It's finally this fact, rather than any ambivalence towards feminism, that presents the greatest difficulty in bringing Mendelssohn's work into dialogue with her contemporaries and with the theoretical apparatuses complicit in carceral practices.<sup>38</sup> An account of the life of the imprisoned mother – to say nothing of the imprisoned child – along with the role of the prison in social reproduction, remains a necessary element within Marxist-feminist inquiry.

While Mendelssohn became a mother only after her direct incarceration was over, the prison remained for her a devastating element of the maternal imaginary. As she writes in one of the most painful poems in *Tondo Aquatique*, addressed to her daughter, Poppy:

By tonight I shall have lost you  
because I cannot hold you  
& be anything other than abused.<sup>39</sup>

Yet it's precisely at moments like this, where the terms of reparation seem entirely displaced by loss and abuse, that good enough history might make us good enough readers. In the ten years following Mendelssohn's death her work has gained a steady and growing readership. The singular facts of her life ask for nothing less than a reorganisation of our acquired habits of reading and critical response. Her work demands an approach that stays conscious of our relative positions within the State and its institutions, and the ways in which poetry has both imagined and resisted those institutions. In *Viola Tricolor*, Mendelssohn presents us with a challenge:

What is Art, O what is She, a baby dandled on a strange man's knee  
For a mother to sing a new history. Too close to impossibility.<sup>40</sup>

Is it impossible that Mendelssohn's work might sing a new history? Or that a new history might sing her history, in turn? For this to happen we have to listen as carefully as we can. If 'Art' here is imagined as a baby, then what other option do we have than to try to be good enough?

The risk in my approach is that by meeting Mendelssohn's negativity and aggression with the reparative impulse, we rush prematurely to fill in the gaps and restore equilibrium. We adapt to reality and forget to transform it, or our transformations come undone in the uneven temporalities of our history. In a work written towards the end of her life, Eve Sedgwick continued to explore the dimensions of the depressive and paranoid modes of relation. Reflecting on her own experience of political activism, she states:

But as I understand my own political history, it has often happened that the propulsive energy of justification, of being or feeling joined with others in a right cause, tends to be structured very much in a paranoid/schizoid fashion, driven by attributed motives, fearful contempt of opponents, collective fantasies of powerlessness and/or omnipotence, scapegoating, purism and schism –paranoid/schizoid, in short, even as the motives that underlie political commitment have much more to do with the complex, mature ethical dimension of the depressive position.<sup>41</sup>

Although I'm wary of drawing parallels, my experience is the opposite. The student revolt of 2010 was a period of openness, rapid education in the truest sense of the word, and a way of being together that remains for me as a resource for thought and action. The rest of it, all of it, came only after we were defeated. But the poetry we read at that time, like Anna's, gave form and shape to our political thinking. It holds open possibility, allowing fragments of bad fantasy to surface without being rejected, knowing always that no defeat was ever defeat the whole way through.

While I was working on this essay, I had to revisit the Library in Cambridge to do some archival research on another project. As always I walked past Anna's desk and thought of it as Anna's desk. While I was in the archives room I received a message from Keston Sutherland, who I hadn't heard from in a long time, asking if I'd seen a letter addressed to me discovered in her papers in Sussex. The letter, replying to my request for a contribution to my magazine, had never been sent. Keston sent me the scan, and there it was: my name in her handwriting, breaching the whole terms of my approach, collapsing the lost past into the present. I reproduce it here, transcribed from the original, with Rimbaud's dots to indicate illegible text:

Dear Luke Roberts

Thank you for your letter and writing. I wish you well in your projected magazine. The 1960's are still fashionable surprisingly enough. I hope that they improve with age as good wine should, then we should be drunk and sleepy, heavy and buzzing. There were people who were intellectuals involved and committed to poetry and art in the 1960s; I miss meeting individuals who didn't have a poetry book in their hands. What is there to "talk about"? However it is twenty years that I have found myself on strike and a stroke made me collapse, not for the first time. Although fear is not a subject that is admitted, or admissible apparently, I do suffer from it, terribly. It's difficult to know whether a woman has the right to admit to this "weakness". What was destructive culturally about the late sixties was the coruscation of poetry, its encroaching disappearance for economic reasons

as much else in this society economics has taken precedent. Individuals are approached and mugged, although this can be done in the most sophisticated ways. The references are filmic. Death becomes scattered thus, diasporic. A teacher of mine once reminded me that great male scholars would not have written and organised their work without their wives and their wives' maids. I needed a chaperone when I left home and this unprotected state has left me in a position [...] of the Irish [...] who has nothing but her own good nature and the fresh air to sustain her. Unless I can organise the 24 hour small screen line of ubiquity, I don't see any hope. The screen light is too strong for me.

The archive will change the kind of stories we can tell about Mendelssohn's life and work. In the vast repositories of notebooks and manuscripts, a new account will emerge, bringing details into sharper focus. What I've tried to articulate in this essay are the significant challenges and opportunities that Mendelssohn's work poses to historically inclined literary criticism. While I've focused on the affective dimension, the resistances to chronology within her publishing history compound this. Her poetry frustrates my desire for progression, however disorderly or damaged, from sequence to sequence and from book to book. My mind reels at the thought of the thousands of pages of undated notebooks in the archive. While her play between languages, her magnificent ventriloquy, sarcasm, and jokes – aspects that I've hardly touched on here – mean that sometimes I don't know what I'm reading, more fundamentally I don't always know *when* I'm reading the work, what history we're in. So I arrange these last items in the screen light, time ringing in my ears.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Grace Lake, *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993). Mendelssohn published under the pseudonym 'Grace Lake' until her collection *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Folio/Equipage, 2000), which was followed by one further pamphlet, *py*. (Hunstanton: Oystercatcher, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> For a compelling oral history of the events of November and December 2010 and some of the aftermath see Matt Myers, *Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation* (London: Pluto, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'basalt', *Implacable Art*, p. 71.
- <sup>4</sup> Sean Bonney, ' "Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform": Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, No. 226 (Feb/March 2011), pp. 17–19.
- <sup>5</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'A man who snatches a ring ...', *Implacable Art*, p. 9.

- <sup>6</sup> Edward Dorn, 'Thesis', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Jennifer Dunbar Dorn, Justin Katko, Reitha Pattison, and Kyle Waugh (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), p. 223.
- <sup>7</sup> Justin Katko, *Rhyme Against the Internet* (Brighton: Crater, 2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), p. 104. For her first use of the phrase, see Tickner, 'The Impossible Object?' in David Freeberg et al, 'The Object of Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1994), pp. 394–410 (407).
- <sup>9</sup> Such as those offered in his most popular book, *The Child, The Family, and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964). This is a condensed version of the two volumes *The Child and the Family* and *The Outside World* (London: Tavistock, 1957).
- <sup>10</sup> D.W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' [1951], *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958), pp. 229–242 (237–238).
- <sup>11</sup> Winnicott, 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation' [1956], *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, pp. 300–305.
- <sup>12</sup> Samuel Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 181.
- <sup>13</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, *py.* (Hunstanton: Oystercatcher, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Two recent popular works that make sustained use of Winnicott are Alison Bechdel's beautiful comic, *Are You My Mother?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015). Jacqueline Rose writes about both works (and about Winnicott) in her recent book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber, 2018).
- <sup>15</sup> For Winnicott's most acute statement on this matter, see his letter to Melanie Klein, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1952, in which he argues: 'I personally think that it is very important that your work should be restated by people discovering in their own way and presenting what they discover in their own language. It is only in this way that the language will be kept alive.' Winnicott, *The Spontaneous Gesture: Selected Letters*, ed. by F. Robert Rodman (London: Karnac, 1999), pp. 33–37 (34).
- <sup>16</sup> Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* (London: Tavistock, 1987), p. 34.
- <sup>17</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'Art made me thin ...', *Implacable Art*, p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> Grace Lake, 'on challenge, positive attitudes, and "les peintures cubistes"', *Viola Tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993): '& cramming "too much" onto 10 x 10/before opening the door to a team of civilian detectives.'
- <sup>19</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2002), pp. 123–151. See also Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes' *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2007), Vol. 106, No. 3, pp. 625–642. For an excellent reflection on this area of Sedgwick's thought see Heather Love, 'Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', *Criticism* (2010), pp. 235–241. See also Robyn Wiegman's important account of the textual history of 'Paranoid and Reparative Reading', in 'The times we're in: Queer feminist criticism and the reparative "turn"', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2014), pp. 4–49.
- <sup>20</sup> Sedgwick, 'Paranoid and Reparative Reading', p. 149.
- <sup>21</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'From Implacable Art', *Implacable Art* (Equipage/Folio: Cambridge, 2001), p. 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, 'The Blacksmith', in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. by Wallace Fowlie, revised by Seth Widden (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), pp. 55–65 (59).
- <sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 58.
- <sup>24</sup> David Triesman, 'Essex', *New Left Review* (July–August 1968). Adrian Mitchell wrote a protest poem about the facility following these events, titled 'Open Day at Porton' and published in *Black Dwarf*, July 19 1968.

- <sup>25</sup> Donald Davie, *These The Companions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 176.
- <sup>26</sup> *Black Dwarf*, July 5 1968.
- <sup>27</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 191.
- <sup>28</sup> Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (London: Bookmarks, 1988), p. 40.
- <sup>29</sup> See for example, the Situationist International communiqué, 'On the Poverty of Student Life', *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. edn, ed. by Ken Mabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 408–429; and André Gorz, 'Destroy the University', *Les Temps Modernes*, No. 285 (1970).
- <sup>30</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'The Gong', manuscript in the Peter Riley papers, Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, MS. Add.10013/2/29.
- <sup>31</sup> Alice Notley, *Tell Me Again* (Santa Barbara: Am Here, 1982).
- <sup>32</sup> *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, p. 73.
- <sup>33</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1975), p. 229.
- <sup>34</sup> For a brilliant account of Riley's thinking around social needs see Samuel Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), especially pp. 81–110.
- <sup>35</sup> Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 196. For Riley's direct comments on Winnicott, see pp. 80–90. Riley published two poems by Grace Lake, 'Rose-Gazing' and 'Prelude to an Imaginary Moorish Castle', in the collection *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970–1991* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1992).
- <sup>36</sup> Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the 'Good Enough Mother'* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), p. 23.
- <sup>37</sup> See D.W. Winnicott, *Deprivation and Delinquency*, ed. by Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (London: Tavistock, 1984). Brooke Hopkins has argued that the 'spatial metaphors that saturate [Winnicott's] writing' are concomitant with the logic of the prison. See Hopkins, 'Winnicott and Imprisonment', *American Imago*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2005), pp. 269–283.
- <sup>38</sup> For a fascinating ethnological investigation, including a brief mention of Winnicott, see Judith Clark, 'The Impact of The Prison Environment on Mothers', *The Prison Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (1995), pp. 306–329. There are some parallels between Clark and Mendelssohn. Clark was a member of the Weather Underground, and was convicted for her part in a robbery in 1981. She was finally granted parole in April 2019.
- <sup>39</sup> Grace Lake, 'Abschied', *Tondo Aquatique* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997).
- <sup>40</sup> Grace Lake, 'for Bruno Alcaraz Massaz' *Viola Tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993).
- <sup>41</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Teaching/Depression', *The Scholar & Feminist*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2006), online: < [http://sfonline.barnard.edu/heilbrun/sedgwick\\_02.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/heilbrun/sedgwick_02.htm) > [Accessed April 30 2019].

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