



Open Library of Humanities



Article

How to Cite: Stanley, A. 2020. 'work with the word that is all'; Politics and Labour in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 11(1): 30, pp. 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.736>

Published: 17 September 2020

Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

'work with the word that is all'; Politics and Labour in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn

Albinia Stanley

St John's College, University of Cambridge, UK
albinianstanley@gmail.com

Existing accounts of Anna Mendelssohn's poetry tend to simplify its complex relationship with politics. I argue that Mendelssohn reaches beyond the typical binary of poesis and praxis, characteristic of the current discourse, to seek her poetic purpose in an engagement with the politics of work. Mendelssohn's poetry explores the work of writing and the politics of labour in several different registers. Drawing on the work of Silvia Federici, I pay particular attention to Mendelssohn's representations of reproductive labour, and the possibilities writing offers to dismantle and reimagine patriarchal-capitalist notions of love and care. I conclude that Mendelssohn's testing of the limits of different conceptions of less alienated work pulls her verse both towards liberation, and towards collapse.

Keywords: Politics; Poetry; Work; Anna Mendelssohn; Reproductive Labour; Silvia Federici; Maternity; Love

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the Anna Mendelssohn Symposium in 2017.¹ The symposium, which followed the opening of Mendelssohn's archive at the University of Sussex in 2015, signified a revival of interest in her work, led by a new generation of women poets and scholars.² In this essay, I aim to contribute to this growing feminist discourse on Mendelssohn's poetry by focusing on her engagement with the politics of work.³ Much of Mendelssohn's limited critical reception has been preoccupied with the relationship between politics and poetry in her oeuvre. To develop this area of critical concern I will offer a reading of Mendelssohn's poetry as a sustained engagement with the concept of 'work', with all the political force that term brings. Preoccupied by the work of writing itself, Mendelssohn's poetry negotiates and explores different sorts of labour,

from pre-industrial craftsmanship to women's unpaid housework. By examining Mendelssohn's poetry through a Marxist-Feminist framework, and particularly the thinking of Silvia Federici, which foregrounds women's unpaid labour as a site for both political action and the critical analysis of capitalist patriarchy, I argue that for Mendelssohn writing holds the possibility of less alienated forms of labour, and in relation to her maternity, less alienated forms of love. However, the crushing dynamics of patriarchal-capitalism are keenly felt in her poetry, and her testing of the limits of different conceptions of less alienated work pulls her verse both towards liberation, and towards collapse.

The hallmark of avant-garde practice is an attempt to effect radical change in both the symbolic and aesthetic field and the social and political field of the everyday.⁴ Arrested in 1971 for association with the anti-capitalist guerrilla group, the Angry Brigade, who claimed responsibility for 25 bombs in London between 1969–72, Mendelssohn's life-story is compelling material to poets and scholars attracted to avant-gardism. Though she always denied involvement with the bomb plots, Mendelssohn was convicted for conspiracy to cause explosions and possession of weapons, receiving a ten-year prison sentence, of which she served five. After leaving prison, she settled in Cambridge, and there she was associated with the network of experimental poets and small presses known as the 'Cambridge School'.⁵ John Wilkinson, in the *Chicago Review*, maintains that for many writers associated with this scene, a 'fierce attachment to lyric poetry persists as a declaratively political practice,' despite the fact that many of the second generation of writers 'encountered dire problems reconciling the demands, seductions, and waywardness of lyric poetry with the urgent need to bear witness against and actively challenge oppression.'⁶ Early commentary on Mendelssohn's poetry remained largely within this network, and within such a context, Mendelssohn's poetry is temptingly emblematic. As a formally innovative poet, who was implicated early in life with revolutionary politics, critics have tended to position her oeuvre as a verdict on the avant-garde project, either presenting her poetry as an iteration of her earlier politics or a turn away from it.

Peter Riley, in his obituary for Mendelssohn, argues that she replaced activism with art: what 'impelled her throughout her life was a 1960s spirit of radical revolt.

At first it was political but, after a great turning point in her life, it was artistic.⁷ Describing Mendelssohn as in total retreat from the material world, he excises politics from her later life – 'poetry and art [were] the [...] exclusive sphere of her existence'.⁸ In setting *praxis* – action – against *poiesis* – creation or production, Riley articulates his anxieties about the avant-garde project.⁹ Implicitly, he takes Mendelssohn's life to be a warning to all poets – a warning that transgressing the boundary he draws between art and politics ends in punishment, exemplified through Mendelssohn's trial and imprisonment.

On the other hand, Iain Sinclair looks back to the Angry Brigade's communiqués to explain Mendelssohn's poetry as 'a revelation of the nature of her political acts'.¹⁰ He links their home-made production and 'broken' form to the kitchen-table publishing methods and free verse favoured by small poetry presses associated with the Cambridge scene, such as Tom Raworth's contemporaneous Matrix Press.¹¹ In depicting Mendelssohn's poetry as the end-point of the Angry Brigade's communiqués, and presenting a continuum between these political messages and Raworth's chapbooks, Sinclair seeks to elide the difference between militant praxis and experimental poetry: 'Stoke Newington is the place where terrorists behave like unpublished poets, and poets cultivate a justified paranoia.'¹² The Angry Brigade's publications, he suggests, 'prophetically' allude to the hybrid aesthetic and theoretical preoccupations of Cambridge poetry in the 70s and 80s; a poetic 'so selfless and communally based [...] that it was universally denounced as elitist and resistant to ordinary intelligence.'¹³ In this formulation, Sinclair emphasises Mendelssohn's link with the revolutionary politics of the Angry Brigade to redeem the Cambridge School from the charge of elitism. His assessment of Mendelssohn's poetry as realising the subversive intent of her activism falls back heavily on the biographical; it is not based in an engagement with her verse, but a desire to use the radical capital of the Angry Brigade's militancy to bolster the political efficacy of a poetic community.

In contrast, Sean Bonney's 2010 essay on Mendelssohn represents an important attempt to access the political content of her poetry on its own terms.¹⁴ While Bonney admits to being flattered by the proposition that poetry can be revolutionary praxis, he concludes that Mendelssohn's refusal to endorse or even talk about

her involvement with the Angry Brigade confounds attempts 'to view Mendelssohn's poetic work as a continuation of left-wing action by other means [...] but that's not to say the poetry retreated into an apolitical hermeticism.'¹⁵ For Bonney, radical form salvages political content: he defines her work as 'properly political' because of its formal innovation, through which new content emerges.¹⁶ Pulling back from his suggestive idea that Mendelssohn's is a poetry of refusal, rooted in her desire to speak in a language which 'not only judges but, variously, pompous poets, social workers, narrow-minded politicians and patriarchal imbeciles of all sorts' could never understand, he limits his conclusion to a utopian claim that Mendelssohn's fragmentation can purify language: 'the untruths that the language carries are pounded into garbage, are twisted out of shape, until the perpetrators of those untruths can no longer enter the language, and so that not new forms, but new statements can emerge.'¹⁷ This attribution of power to poetry conflates formal innovation and political resistance, overlooking the pessimistic dimension of Mendelssohn's practice. Bonney's concern to find hope for experimental poetry in Mendelssohn's words overrides his attention to her awareness, and discomfort, at the proximity between *poiesis* and *praxis*.

Although he resolves the problem too quickly, the terms Bonney raises are helpful. Mendelssohn's work constantly refuses Riley's impulse to oppose *poiesis* and *praxis*, creating instead a layered poetics in which the two are always intermeshed. She titled her first pamphlet, published in 1993, *viola tricolor*; a name which could be the fanciful *nom de guerre* of a Pétroleuse, the infamous female revolutionaries rumoured to have set Paris on fire with homemade bombs in the last days of the Paris Commune. A poem in the collection, 'language blows away', is dedicated to the feminist observational film-maker Kim Longinotto, whose work is structured around the voices of women engaged in struggles against patriarchal and institutional violence.¹⁸ In 'language blows away', Mendelssohn shifts register with each line as if editing together film shots, cutting from aesthetic theorisation to abrupt political reality. Disarticulating political expression from art-making is a compartmentalisation which the internal logic of the poem cannot sustain:

i could argue until the idioms vapourized. [sic]
what Does experimental mean? in terms of division of experience determi-
native or subjected
but was carted off. the clerk at the family court agreed.¹⁹

Mendelssohn's over-extended line drawls out the discussion of 'experience deter-
minative or subjected' between academic poets, whose discourse floats above the
daily reality of institutional *subjecting to* delineated beneath. With the line break,
she executes a sharp shift from an academic vocabulary to a colloquial one: 'but was
carted off'. The possibility of losing herself in the idiom of the autonomous artistic
sphere – already insubstantial and dreamy – vaporizes when the language of the
poet's experience intervenes: arrest, police brutality, the removal of her children
through the family courts. For Mendelssohn, the laying down of the laws of aesthet-
ics easily shifts into the judicial verdict of the powers that be.

Although resistant to apolitical readings, Mendelssohn's poetry refuses charac-
terisation as revolutionary praxis, as exemplified by Sinclair. In the opening lines of
viola tricolor, Mendelssohn depicts militancy as an iteration of patriarchal control,
sketching the girlish revolutionary that her title invokes as a victim:

the young girl taken from a trained woman,
whose poetry was mocked not as a man's,
and charged with jealousy as her inspirational motive,
was thrust into pirateer's hands
accused of purity – the south was waiting
to tighten its iron band
-lock it with another *idea* of purity
that of revolutionary command.²⁰

Taken from the 'trained women' by the lascivious 'pirateer's hand', *Viola Tricolor*
is forced from a competent and feminine world of poetry into a chauvinist world
of militant politics. Suggestions of puritanical morality and sexual violation merge

with the oppression needed to maintain political control: 'accused of purity [...] lock it with another *idea* of purity|that of revolutionary command'. Recalling Mendelssohn's frequent assertion that she was taken hostage by political militants in the 1970s, militant political organising appears in the poem as a threat to artistic creation.²¹ In an unpublished essay, 'What is Poetry?', she writes: 'I do not think that poetry needs fame. There seems to have grown up an idea that it can be used for propaganda purposes', but 'Poetry is not that'.²² Indeed, throughout her papers she insists, 'I am an artist not a terrorist', summing up her position in a letter to Denise Riley:

It can only be writing. Making it into real politics has always scared the living daylight out of me. But then it means that writing has the politics in it but it still should be writing rather than legalized crime which it so rapidly becomes.²³

How should we explicate Mendelssohn's complex sense that 'it can only be writing' but 'that writing has the politics in it'? Her tautological syntax ('*writing* has the politics in it but it still should be *writing*') communicates her anxieties about the proximity of politics to her poetry. The repetition creates a sense of slippage, as if 'politics', once uttered, must be contained and boxed in again by 'writing'.

In some notes on the avant-garde, dated 1990, Mendelssohn considers the 'alliance between social & artistic innovation' which is characteristic of avant-garde movements. Scrawled in the corner of the same page is a poem which draws her poetic vocabulary in another direction:

work with the word that is all
in the end there is the definition:
which should not need elaborating upon
to adult, literate people²⁴

Appearing like the final riposte to an argument happening outside of the poem, 'work with the word that is all' sounds like Mendelssohn's answer to the vexed dis-

inction between writing and political action. But what does it mean to 'work with the word', and how does this seemingly crisp articulation of poetic purpose play out across the body of her poetry?

Across her oeuvre, Mendelssohn explores different types and modalities of labour, from pre-industrial craftsmanship to creative vocation, the alienation of production under capitalism and the reproductive labours of mothering and care. This interest in representing and interrogating work is matched by an insistence across her private papers that her writing be considered her job, despite its lack of economic remuneration. 'I need the people [...] to be told that I am not simply an Unemployed Single Person', she asserts, in a letter to Denise Riley, detailing the court hearings for custody of her children, 'I have sufficient work to do, albeit unpaid, to last 5 lifetimes at least.'²⁵ In another to Peter Riley, Mendelssohn rejects a donation of bookshelves, 'I'd prefer [them] to go to a person who considers themselves unemployed. I have never considered myself to be either unemployed or unemployable', only 'thoroughly condemned for being a poetess'.²⁶ Her frequent self-identification as a 'poetess' and 'not a poet – it is strange how difficult it seems, or has seemed to be to communicate the difference that is not necessarily any less literary and|or intelligent' emphasises how important gender was to her conception of her poetry-as-labour.²⁷ Engaging with Mendelssohn's writing as a form of 'work' – one which is material, unpaid, gendered, and exploited – allows us to uncover different political, and specifically gendered, cadences in her verse.

Mendelssohn's poetic practice has its basis in a traditional materialist conception of poetry as craft. In her work, she frequently figures herself as a maker or shaper of materials, drawing analogies between her rendering of verse and her visual art. This is exemplified in the title poem of *Implacable Art*:

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.²⁸

The crushing forces of capital – embodied by the 'fat coca-cola man', a commodified Father Christmas put to work as bailiff – should be resisted not through a cry for help, but instead with a 'yell' for the working materials of the artist. Her reference to a 'burin' – a tool for engraving plates in the production of prints – suggests writing as a form of drawing or inscription; Mendelssohn disliked typing and preferred to compose poetry by hand, not only in notebooks but scrawled in the margins of academic notes or on the back of shopping lists. In her manuscripts, her dynamic layout of words and lines on the page shows how, unlike type, handwriting is comparatively unconstrained by artificial norms and can express gestural rhythms. The inclusion of reproductions of Mendelssohn's drawings and facsimiles alongside typeset poems in *Implacable Art* acknowledges how central drawing was to her poetic practice.

Mendelssohn's introduction of the tools of engraving, in the title poem of her first proper book, is also significant in linking this contemporary publication to an early modern form of mass production. In another poem in *Implacable Art*, Mendelssohn develops this comparison between the pre-industrial craftsman and the poet, as she imagines her engineering of verse via the master-craft of clock-making:

...a clock set,

clock within a clock, a nest of clocks & set in the heat of the intricate
mechanism
a heart. a clock in the shape of a heart. the exquisite birthday present: a
poem of objects that live by magic.²⁹

In the excessive repetition of 'clock', the word's semantic sense is lost in the noisy reiterations of its ticking. What remains is language's mechanical revenants, its sonic and physical matter. Drawing out the arbitrary relation between the look and feel of words and their meaning, Mendelssohn's paranomastic play with 'set' and 'heat/heart' emphasises words as raw material, to be fitted and built into lines. Recalling cogs and wheels turning together, her fusing of short clauses into the line confirms her allusion between writing a poem and making the 'intricate mechanism' of clock-work.

How are we to interpret this meshing of poet's and artificer's craft? Vicky Sparrow reads 'the heart fused with the clock mechanism' as an uncanny description of 'the

entrapment of human labour at the centre of all manufactured objects.¹³⁰ Indeed, in *Capital*, Marx uses the production of pocket-watches as the archetype of 'genuine manufacture', the process of industrial assembly in which a commodity is produced not by a single craftsman, but by a multitude of workers each responsible for a single detail of the product.³¹ 'Formerly the individual work of a Nuremberg artificer,' he writes, 'the watch has been transformed into the social product of an immense number of detail labourers, such as mainspring makers, dial makers, spiral spring makers, jewelled hole makers, ruby lever makers', going on to name a further 30 categories of detail worker.³² While the episode in Mendelssohn's poem is initially tonally ambiguous — 'How many operators,|was it all one rush for the unbeatable biography resistant to auto, closed door,|abbreviation fever, throwing away no book, beating down bar lines, a clock set,' — it ends with delight at the mystical automata created: 'a clock in the shape of a heart. the exquisite birthday present: a|poem of objects that live by magic'. The rhythm is important in achieving this shift; the poem's time regularises, slowing from a harried 'rush' through different registers, falling into place as clockwork and then heartbeat. The movement from free verse into metre gives a sense of the words coming to life. If Mendelssohn's heart-clock alludes to the alienation of the detail worker, as Sparrow has identified, the magical impression of the final lines simultaneously draws a forceful invocation of their counterpoint: the historic, almost mythical, figure of 'the Nuremberg artificer', the master craftsman who fashioned the whole of the watch from raw materials.

Mendelssohn's nostalgic suggestion of the poet as a pre-industrial handicraftsman possessing the means of production is complicated by her embedding of a heart in the 'intricate mechanism' of poetic craft. The heart isn't just symbolic of human life, but of emotion, and especially love and openness. Mendelssohn's heart, which pumps life into her verse, introduces immaterial and emotional valences to her word-work, reminding us of her assertion elsewhere that 'being left-handed in my writing means that I write close to my heart, biology is helpless in some respects.'³³ Mendelssohn's suggestion that her writing is driven by biological imperative genders her work, recalling her adamant identification as a poetess, not a poet. Furthermore, by grounding the common metonym of heart for feeling in the physical reality of her

body, Mendelssohn drives the figure of speech to its conceptual limits. She writes from the heart, with the body; from the body, with the heart: an intermeshing of emotional and physical exertion which is characteristic of women's reproductive work.

Reproductive work, the unpaid labour women do in the home, further emerges in the poem 'Staged Whispers' as an explicit simile for writing:

a woman uses syntax like a broom sweeps across an old fortress
 a man snaps backwards, walk, walk faster, he has heard –
 the march militant and although old cannot grow
 Out of temptation to discipline his salvation
 He has been instructed to expunge poetry, to uproot trees
 So he takes a woman to be his charge...

The rhythmic motion of the broom is like the sweep of the line from the left of the page to the right, line after line. It is a familiar tool, like syntax, inscribing meaning in repeated use. But the broom, while prosaic, also signals the fairytale when set alongside an 'old fortress', remembering how the witch's broomstick transforms an everyday tool of women's work into an object of magical revolt. In verse too, syntax is magically inverted, its normal rules bent by the poetess. In an echo of the lines from *viola tricolor* that I explored earlier, this dissident and creative femininity is disciplined by patriarchal violence, invoked in the figure of an old and puritanical revolutionary: the man, who unable to resist the pull of 'the march militant', follows commands to 'expunge poetry' by kidnapping 'a woman'. His attempts at coercion take a ludic turn, when it is he who ends up being re-educated by his prisoner: '& later apologises|for knowing no tradition, for syphoning turpentine in ballet shoes'. His repeated apologies – 'for hiding the used car tip,|for having no sense of depth|and even less of dimension' – remind us that Mendelssohn's poetry is an implacable art, which, despite gendered persecution, cannot easily be cowed.

In its resistance to the oppressions of reproductive labour, Mendelssohn's poetry shares ground with Marxist-feminist theory. Since the 1970s feminists such as Silvia

Federici have insisted that an analysis of women's unpaid labour is central to the critique of capitalism. Federici argues in *Wages Against Housework* that waged 'productive' work (largely done by men) can only exist if maintained on a daily and generational basis by unwaged 'reproductive' work (largely done by women).³⁴ If there weren't women at home to feed the worker, wash his clothes, soothe his worries, bear and raise his children, his long hours and low wages could not be maintained. 'To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking.'³⁵ Federici goes on to show how women's work in the informal sector is at once physical and emotional. Capital's exploitation of women's labour depends on recasting reproductive work as a 'labour of love', an elision of love and work which 'day after day cripples our bodies, our sexuality, our social relations'.³⁶

These dynamics of capitalist exploitation – emotional, sexual, and physical – run right through Mendelssohn's poetry. They take centre stage in 'friday.', which unfolds as a meditation on the nature of work under capitalism, and the fraught threshold between labour and love. The poem begins in a lyric mode through which Mendelssohn introduces a persecuted female subject:

Has anyone spoken to me today? A product of fears and phobias.
Who transcends immortality by killing herself before remembering
how much she loved the earth this life. To distance myself
From hatred I have nothing to say to inquisitorial people,
and so they call me mad and I watch them fume and stomp.
It might be football spectacular fever combined with detestation
Of singularity in the female writer whose possession is a Muse
Invisible apart from the approximate complement thrashing the wave³⁷

Describing herself as 'a product of fears and phobias', the poem's opening line stakes Mendelssohn's place in a lineage of pathologised women which, as explored elsewhere in poems such as 'in medéa mé', stretches from Euripidean Tragedy to the women on Freud's couch.³⁸ Her loneliness and suicidal ideation, imagined through

an alienating switch in pronouns from 'me' to 'herself', suggests the asylum – or the prison – as a spectral setting for the poem. She is persecuted by 'inquisitorial people': who, reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition, are not friends but members of institutions – doctors, social workers, policemen, literary critics – who visit her room in the asylum, demanding she, and metonymically her poems, answer their questions. When the subject is found unyielding, her resistance is branded madness. The 'inquisitorial people[s]' temper tantrum when faced with her refusal ('and I watch them fume and stomp') is a result of their group-think masculinity, 'football spectacular fever', and according hatred of the woman poet's distinctiveness and dissent: 'combined with detestation|of singularity in the female writer'. Mendelssohn's muse is 'Invisible', imperceptible to others except through the phonetic disturbance she creates: 'the approximate complement thrashing the waves'.

Maligned and insubordinate, Mendelssohn's lyric 'I' is like Silvia Federici's theorization of the witch: the 'embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone.'³⁹ The eradication of these singular female subjects by capital is played out in the second stanza as Mendelssohn articulates a dystopian vision of alienated labour:

this place declares itself unbeatable, it rises higher and higher
in an oven of city's proportions' perfect bake, baking uniform cakes
to standard book size, coated in pink, peach, chocolate, toffee
And occasionally peppermint green

The conceit of the cake factory works on many levels. First and foremost, the vast and unbeatable nature of the 'oven of city's proportions', in a poem named after the end of the working week, expresses the oppressiveness of what Kathi Weeks calls the reification of work's privatisation, 'the fact that at present one must work to "earn a living" is taken as part of the natural order rather than as a social convention'.⁴⁰ It also operates as a critique of the commodification of literature under capitalism. The repetition of 'bake' in 'baking' and the internal rhyme with 'cakes' introduces the

monotonous rhythm of the assembly line into Mendelssohn's limitless cake factory, in which 'baking uniform cakes|to standard book size' is a vision of a culture industry that, intent on commodifying intellectual labour, forestalls any innovation deeper than a candy-coating. The metaphor of the poem as a 'perfect bake' ironises mainstream poetries in Britain since the 1950s, particularly the works of the Movement poets and their successors, whose verse has been characterised as 'demanding little of the reader but passive consumption'.⁴¹ Simultaneously, the cake factory comments on the exploitation of women's labour under capitalism. Baking is a quintessential feminine skill: the endless demand for 'uniform cakes', available in a set of cloying colours, communicates how women's creativity and independence is curtailed by their reproduction as 'perfect bake mothers'.

Indeed, Mendelssohn figures the intrusion of profit motives into matters of poetry as a form of violation:

really the law should not encroach
Upon poetry. It is a different voice that rakes embers for clues.
Poetry can be stripped. Racketeers compromise advantageously
Unracked by the objects of their disquieted attention
Work is too much trouble for those who don't love their subject

Merging the police officer and the literary critic, the critic-detective rakes the verse for clues, stripping and searching poetry for proof and profit alike. These 'racketeers' are '[u]nracked by the objects of their disquieted attention'; criminals, who though somewhat uneasy, feel no guilt about their dishonest exploitation of poetry. By playing 'racketeer' against the verb 'to rack', Mendelssohn's emphasis falls on how little the 'evil keepers' of poetry invoked (to borrow from another poem) allow the 'objects of their disquieted attention' to trouble them, suppressing their engagement with the poem.⁴² It is a 'different voice' which can decipher evidence, and as in 'to any who want poems to give them answers', those who demand 'precise directions' from art shut their senses to it.⁴³ The work itself is 'too much trouble' when there is no love.

The pessimism that opens the second stanza – 'this place declares itself unbeatable' – turns to mourning in the opening of the third:

And literature is lost, lost to the word work, lost to the temptation
of gradgrind rectification and its concomitant collapse
The slow haul of never, dough won't stretch quite far enough
In the shape of dough grey slipping into a dappled coat
the throat is ironed and cut down to size from the mountains
from the hills that dare to stretch a desire to walk in fresh air
Out of true for nothing in common where knowledge is blacked

The dynamics of capitalist accumulation bring the alienation of wage-labour to writing, as the whole – literature – is broken into granular 'word work'. The poet no longer has the freedom to experiment, as their work is submitted to 'gradgrind rectification', a reference to Dickens's schoolteacher whose rigid pedagogy is defined by the mantra 'nothing but Facts'.⁴⁴ Antithetical to art-making, such an approach ensures literature's 'concomitant collapse'. The impossibility of life for the woman writer is felt in the impoverishment of her material conditions, communicated in Mendelssohn's play on the dual meaning of 'dough' as both uncooked bread and money in: 'The slow haul of never, dough won't stretch quite far enough|In the shape of dough.' The medial caesura and line-break stretches the image of the dough that will never quite go far enough over three clauses, evoking the desperate pattern of living hand to mouth, week after week. But in a bid to escape the drudgery of living on the breadline, Mendelssohn's lines run away with themselves, tumbling free-fall into referential chains of words: 'in the shape of dough grey slipping into a dappled coat|the throat is ironed and cut down to size from the mountains|from the hills that dare to stretch a desire to walk in fresh air". Though hunger and oppression conspire to silence her – 'the throat is ironed and cut down to size' – the verse charges off towards transcendence and hope, as the mountains turn to hills, the hills to the liberation of a daring walk in fresh air, only to fall short, time and time again, as it collapses into oblivion: 'Out of true for nothing in common where knowledge is blacked'.

This dual motion – towards liberation, towards collapse – is the defining sensation of Mendelssohn's prosody. But while, characteristically, the poem gives 'no answers', it does raise an 'interesting question'.⁴⁵ The negative formulation of 'work is too much trouble for those who don't love their subject', calls to mind its opposite, holding in suspension the possibility that love could be a mediating term: for what happens if we *do* love our subject? Can love change the way we work, or work change the way we love? For Federici, demystifying women's labour is at the heart of being able to love again, and being able to care in new and different ways. In a lecture from 2006, she reflects on how women might resist exploitation on the terrain of reproductive labour without destroying themselves and the people they care for.⁴⁶ She argues that the answer lies in making the separation between work that recreates 'life', human beings, and that which reproduces 'labor-power', the next generation of workers. For example, much of child-rearing, is, for Federici, the 'work of policing our children, so that they will conform to a particular work discipline'. By recognising and refusing these areas of work, we 'open the possibility of a process of re-composition among women', which can liberate our social and sexual relations from the crippling elision of labour and love: 'We thus began to see that by refusing broad areas of work, we not only could liberate ourselves but could also liberate our children. We saw that our struggle was not at the expense of the people we cared for, though we may skip preparing some meals or cleaning the floor. Actually our refusal opened the way for their refusal and the process of their liberation.'

Mendelssohn too is interested in 're-compositing' love and care in her poetry, writing in 'What is Poetry?', that 'my main drive towards Poetry has always been [...] founded on a committed desire to construct an inviolable space in which my mind could love and hopefully realize itself.' Writing is for Mendelssohn a labour which holds the promise of a model of work which is less alienated. At times, it might even 'construct an inviolable space', which the pervasive forces of capital cannot penetrate; in this space, the self can love and realise itself, outside of capitalist-patriarchal definitions. This 'inviolable space' is articulated particularly in relation to maternity and child-rearing, as she formulates poetry as a labour which can create liberated forms of life for her children: 'I created a world of art for my children|to live in.' However,

her symbiosis of maternal love and artistic creation is constantly de-legitimated: 'But I am required to|Leave my world of art & Repent.'⁴⁷ Her persecution as a mother is thus linked to her persecution as an artist:

I was told off for loving my own children.
I didn't think that they would have to be removed
and that I would be spoken to as though I were
Pigswill. We are of different species.
I don't incarcerate artists.

In this explicit autobiographical reference to the removal of her three children from her care, Mendelssohn pushes us to question what 'loving' your own children really means. Is 'loving' the productive work of feeding and raising them? Or is it the work of liberating their minds, so they are able to see beyond the confines of accepted reality?

In 'digne', the pleasures of maternity are set into conflict with the practicalities of child-care:

and yet... when reading...
attention snatched
and not by children.
so that was curtailed.
as apparently I was enjoying being with
my children.
when I should have been
cooking cooking cooking
corking corking clucking [...]
bloody food.
i don't like all that fuss
Any chance for forget it
Weetabix.
Snowflakes.

No, we haven't.

Why discuss food?⁴⁸

Facing the objects of reading and writing can become impossible with children behind you. The short lines suggest abrupt responses to a child who seeks to pull her mother away from reading, asking what there is for dinner – 'Weetabix' – or if they have any other food in the house: 'No, we haven't'. The poet's preference for intellectual work over housework sees her branded a neglectful mother: 'and yet... when reading... |attention snatched|and not by children.|so that was curtailed.' Mendelssohn's bitter chorus – 'cooking cooking cooking|corking corking clucking' – strongly remembers Federici's call for mothers to refuse their role as industrious, mindless hens by refusing whole areas of labour: 'bloody food. | [...] Any chance for forget it'.

Yet behind Mendelssohn's defiance lies a creeping sense of alienation. In the line 'apparently I was enjoying being with my children', the use of 'apparently' works to refer away from the authority of her own lived experience to that of an outside observer, recorded in the generic language of a social work report. Splintered across the short lines, her subjectivity cannot recuperate the past except through repeating back fragments of what she has been told by others. Some lines bear traces of guilt. Is Mendelssohn contemplating 'snowflakes' or telling her children to? They are a wondrous but cold and insubstantial distraction for children who clamour for food. As in the final stanza of 'friday.', the delight of language resists but cannot staunch the intrusion of reality.

In this light, 'digne.' is a painful riposte to Federici's assertion that women can struggle on the terrain of our most intimate lives without destroying ourselves and those we love. Her formulation, which makes the division between the creation of life and labour-power that can liberate women, feels flimsy when imagined on the scale of the individual life. For how can women experiment with their maternal obligations when the consequences are so fearful? We can kick cleaning floors, skip preparing one meal, but what about two, or three, or four? Mendelssohn's mourning for her children, and her own motherhood, as they are 'snatched' from her care exposes the catastrophic breakdown implicit in Federici's polemic.

While writing can provide an alternative mode of loving, Mendelssohn reveals, as ever, its limits. Across her verse, she puts on the polemicist's hat and takes it off again, shifting line-by-line between the possibility of liberation in art-making and the impoverishment of daily reality. In her engagement with work in her poetry, and the work of writing itself, Mendelssohn displays an attachment to what has been perceived, in Wilkinson's words, as lyric's 'saving grace': 'its resistance to profit, instrumentality and material progress'.⁴⁹ But she is skeptical of these sorts of easy anti-capitalist justifications, trying out, and broaching the limits of, a series of metaphorical labours associated with Marxist thought. The pre-industrial craftsman does not capture the gendered 'heart' which beats at the centre of the poem, but the poetess is persecuted by capital and revolution alike. Finally, the liberation of love and writing in post-work imaginaries, like Federici's, cannot easily be sustained. Mendelssohn's poetry communicates, like Wilkinson, a doubt of the potency of 'poetry's categorical uselessness [...] against the insatiable convertors of life into measurable value'.⁵⁰ It is the movement between these two poles – between poetry's grace and poetry's failure – which animates her verse at the level of prosody, troubling the limits of the discourses it presses against.

At the bottom of a letter to Riley, Mendelssohn has added a diagram by hand.⁵¹ It is the floor plan of a building which, with an inner quadrangle, resembles a prison. The open space in the middle is labelled 'Poetry', and is enclosed all around by the exterior: 'POLITICS'. Near the boundary of the two is a locale of juxtaposed lines, labelled '(extinction)'. To escape this prison house altogether, one must go through politics, but by traveling that way, you have to leave poetry behind. The only other option for exit is extinction, a suicide bomb detonated in the corner which explodes the wall between the two. For Mendelssohn, poetry and politics stipulate each other, even if the relationship is a negative one: poetry is always already embedded, or blocked in, by the political. Beneath the drawing, Mendelssohn writes: 'if those lines are strong enough they go straight through our spirits & our souls & I don't think that should be communicated'. These lines – the lines where poetry and politics meet – are explosive and hard to bear, but they are drawn by a hand which, as Mendelssohn told us earlier, writes from the heart. The always frustrated promise of poetry to

recompose patriarchal notions of love and care propels her verse on, towards liberation, and towards collapse.

Notes

- ¹ See <https://amsymposium.wordpress.com/> for information on the Symposium.
- ² Eleanor Careless (who introduced me to Mendelssohn's poetry when I was a student) and Vicky Sparrow, organisers of the Symposium, as well as Sara Crangle, who oversees Mendelssohn's archive at the University of Sussex, are salient names in this feminist revival. See Eleanor Rose Careless, *Serve your own sentences: incarceration in the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2018) & Sara Crangle, 'The Agonies of Ambivalence: Anna Mendelssohn, la poétesse maudite', *Modernism/modernity*. 25:3 (2018), 461–498. See <https://www.thekeep.info/the-keep-news-anna-mendelssohn-archive-now-available-to-researchers/> for information on the archive.
- ³ This is an aspect of Mendelssohn's practice which has been subject to increased attention since this essay was written. See Eleanor Careless, 'Art Takes All My Time: Work in the Poetry and Prison Writing of Anna Mendelssohn' in *Poetry and Work: Work in Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Poetry*, ed. Jo Lindsay Walton & Ed Luker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 165–193.
- ⁴ See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. xv.
- ⁵ It is difficult to establish how far Mendelssohn interacted with other experimental poets living in Cambridge. Peter Riley emphasises Mendelssohn's solitude and indifference to her contemporaries, asserting that she 'was not connected to any local poetical coterie: she hated Pound, and took little interest in modern poetry in English' in his eulogy for her in the *PN Review*. See Peter Riley, 'Poet Peter Riley Remembers Anna Mendelssohn', in 'News and Notes', ed. Eleanor Crawford, *PN Review* 191, Volume 36 Number 3 (January – February 2010) <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=5971> [accessed 02/02/2016]. However, during her life, Mendelssohn's work was published by Rod Mengham's Equipage and other Cambridge poetry presses and recently published poems suggest a higher level of engagement with Cambridge poetry than Riley suggests, see 'For J.H. Prynne' and '[The closing line of Ian Patterson's 'No Dice...']', in *The Paper Nautilus*, p. 31. Mendelssohn also gave readings at poetry events in Cambridge, including the 1991 Cambridge Conference for Contemporary Poetry, where she read alongside 22 poets brought together on the grounds 'that their work can be characterized as innovative, modernist or even avant-garde'. See Geoffrey Ward's review of her reading in 'Serious Poets Return to Cambridge', *PN Review*, Volume 17 Number 6 (July 1991), 14. Her personal correspondence and notes in her archive show a great deal of interest in her contemporaries. She mentions in a letter to Denise Riley on 20th August 1990 that she has been reading Ian Patterson's work, and also compliments Riley on recent poems, see SxMs109/3/A/1/51/1, Anna Mendelssohn Archive, University of Sussex, The Keep (all documents I will refer to in the archive are stored at The Keep and begin with the identifying class-mark SxMs109). She was also in correspondence with poets such as Simon Jarvis, Drew Milne, Rod Mengham, Barry MacSweeney, and Tom Raworth among others, see SxMs109/3/A/1/22, 36, 31, 50. If we understand the Cambridge School as a network of poets, rather than a house style or political alignment, Mendelssohn was certainly involved and even sustained by this network.
- ⁶ John Wilkinson, 'Off the Grid: Lyric and Politics in Andrea Brady's Embrace', *Chicago Review*, British Poetry Issue 53:1 (Spring 2007), 95–115 (p. 102; p. 98).
- ⁷ Peter Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn Obituary', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2009/dec/15/anna-mendelssohn-obituary>>.

- ⁸ Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn Obituary'.
- ⁹ This opposition has its genesis in Aristotle's distinction of the terms, 'Production has its end in something other than itself, but action does not, since its end is acting well itself'; see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), p. 154.
- ¹⁰ Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. 28.
- ¹¹ Sinclair, p. 25.
- ¹² Sinclair, p. 25.
- ¹³ Sinclair, p. 28.
- ¹⁴ Sean Bonney, "'Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform": Anna Mendelssohn', *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, #226 (Feb/March 2011), 17–20, (p. 18; p. 19; p. 17).
- ¹⁵ Bonney, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ Bonney, p. 19.
- ¹⁷ Bonney, p. 19.
- ¹⁸ Belinda Smaill, Interview with Kim Longinotto, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 1:2 (2007), 177–187, (p. 177). DOI: 10.1386/sdf.1.2.177_7.
- ¹⁹ Anna Mendelssohn, 'language blows away', *Viola Tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993), unpaginated.
- ²⁰ *viola tricolor*, unpaginated.
- ²¹ Mendelssohn writes in an autobiographical note for Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos* anthology: 'My academic career was brought to an abrupt halt in 1967 by harassment, both political and emotional. Upon returning to this country, in 1970, I was attacked, my own poetry seized, and my person threatened with strangulation if I dared utter one word of public criticism. I was unable to return to university at that point and was silenced.' In a correspondence with Andrew Duncan, she emphasises her lack of willing involvement with the Angry Brigade: '[I was] frogmarched off the Essex campus in 1970 by a fellow poet who didn't want me to be either single, younger than him or a Writer (...) I had been handed over-in the middle of a vast lyrical metropolitan exequy's composition (incepted by me & in the process of being incised upon paper) by a group who were writing for Tariq Ali's 'Black Dwarf' who wanted Politics not Poetry to a strange flat in Stamford Hill where I was seized by a group armed with stolen chequebooks & weapons.' See *Conductors of Chaos*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996), p. 184 and Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: Bernache nonnette, by Grace Lake', *Angel Exhaust*, 15 (Autumn 1997), 105–110 <<http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordcdf7-2.html?id=13920>>.
- ²² 'What is Poetry?', though the piece is undated Mendelssohn writes that the essay stems from a reading that she was invited to give at the Froebel Institute in Roehampton College on 4 November 1997, see 'Notes: topics including poetry, poetics and Greek mythology', SxMs109/6/B/6.
- ²³ Undated note, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/1 and letter from Anna Mendelssohn to Denise Riley, 20 September 1989, SxMs109/3/A/1/51/1.
- ²⁴ These notes are dated 19 February 1990, see 'Notes: topics including ancient history, modern art and the Avant-Garde', SxMs109/6/B/1.
- ²⁵ Letter from Anna Mendelssohn to Denise Riley, 20 September 1989, SxMs109/3/A/1/51/1.
- ²⁶ On back on Paul Klee 'Flora auf Sand' postcard, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.
- ²⁷ In a letter to Peter Riley, dated only 15 January, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/2.
- ²⁸ Anna Mendelssohn, 'from Implacable Art.', *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Folio/Equipage, 2000), p. 1.
- ²⁹ 'a man who snatches a ring', *IA*, p. 9.
- ³⁰ Vicky Sparrow, "A poem of objects that live by magic": the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn', *Culture Matters*, 31 August 2016 <<https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/contributors/item/2359-a-poem-of-objects-that-live-by-magic-the-poetry-of-anna-mendelssohn>>.

- ³¹ Karl Marx, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: S. Sonnenschein, Lowery & Co., 1887), p. 240.
- ³² Marx, p. 240.
- ³³ In a postcard of John Flaxman's 'A Procession of Ancient British Priests' to Peter Riley, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.
- ³⁴ Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework' (Bristol: Power of Women Collective/Falling Wall Press, 1975), p. 4.
- ³⁵ Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', p. 5.
- ³⁶ Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', p. 6.
- ³⁷ 'friday', *IA*, p. 31.
- ³⁸ Medea is a sorceress in Ancient Greek Mythology who infamously murders her own children when abandoned by her husband, and heroine of the eponymous play by Euripides; 'in medéa mé', *IA*, p. 4.
- ³⁹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 11.
- ⁴⁰ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.
- ⁴¹ Richard Caddel and Peter Quatermain, *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. xv.
- ⁴² 'Poetry does not deserve evil keepers', *IA*, p. 45.
- ⁴³ 'to any who want poems to give them answers', *IA*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1854), p. 13.
- ⁴⁵ 'to any who want poems to give them answers', *IA*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁶ Silvia Federici, 'Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint', *Variant*, 37 (2010) <https://www.variant.org.uk/37_38texts/9PreLab.html>.
- ⁴⁷ 'But that wasn't what', *IA*, p. 13.
- ⁴⁸ 'digne', *IA*, p. 54.
- ⁴⁹ Wilkinson, 'Off the Grid', p. 100.
- ⁵⁰ Wilkinson, 'Off the Grid', p. 99.
- ⁵¹ Letter to Peter Riley, 14 April 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/1.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Stanley, A. 2020. 'work with the word that is all'; Politics and Labour in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 11(1): 30, pp.1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.736>

Published: 17 September 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The text 'OPEN ACCESS' followed by a circular icon containing a padlock with a diagonal slash through it, representing open access.