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'Posies for sophists': Anna Mendelssohn and Veronica Forrest-Thomson

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This article seeks to read the poetry and poetics of Anna Mendelssohn and Veronica Forrest-Thomson in dialogue with one another. Both were associated with the 'Cambridge School' of poetry, but never acquired the professional and social security enjoyed by some of the men of the movement. Beginning by offering a 'Forrest-Thomsonian' reading of Mendelssohn according to the precepts of Forrest-Thomson's theory of poetry in *Poetic Artifice*, it then outlines Mendelssohn's strategies for dealing with the responsibilities and challenges of poetic form. It then uses these principles to attempt a 'Mendelssohnian' reading of Forrest-Thomson's poem 'Approaching the Library'. Ultimately, it is hoped that by reading the poets together, we can explore their poetics and its relationship to knowledge through concrete examples of their texts' operations.

some have clutched their jugular veins

& relaxed no longer Than a freeze.

posies for sophists, trimmed around rare heads.[1]

There are many similarities between the poetries of Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Anna Mendelssohn. Both were associated with the 'Cambridge School' of poetry, and lived and studied in Cambridge, but never acquired the professional and social security enjoyed by some of the men of the movement. Indeed, both in their work demonstrate a suspicion of academic sophistry, while still striving for a rigorous and innovative approach to the unmet challenges of poetic form. Each has seen a revival of critical interest in her work in the last ten years, helped in both cases by the availability of archives (at Girton College, Cambridge and the University of Sussex, respectively). And yet few critics mention them in the same sentence, much less attempt to read their work in dialogue. This essay therefore examines the poetics of each poet and demonstrates how they might have read one another.

While it seems likely that Mendelssohn would have been aware of Forrest-Thomson's work, there are no direct references to her in Mendelssohn's published writing. However, we can use the poetics derived from our reading of Mendelssohn's 'non-meaningful' language to examine Forrest-Thomson's texts from a new critical perspective and reveal a common interest in how poetry functions to provide alternative constructions of knowledge. Both are concerned about any particular meaning achieving a totality and see the polyvalence of poetry as a way of disrupting this. Both have a skeptical interest in academic systems and use the languages of science and *technē* to expand the role of poetry. This essay will bring these concerns together for the first time. Beginning by offering a 'Forrest-Thomsonian' reading of Mendelssohn according to the precepts of her theory of poetry *Poetic Artifice*, this essay will begin to outline Mendelssohn's strategies for dealing with the responsibilities and challenges of poetic form in her poem 'Ship in a bottle'. We will then use these principles to attempt a 'Mendelssohnian' reading of a Forrest-Thomson poem, 'Approaching the Library'. These (admittedly at times ungainly) adjectival forms of the poets' names will be used throughout, in order to indicate the particular character of the poetic processes of each and to bring them into dialogue. By reading them together, we can explore this alternative poetic approach to knowledge through concrete examples of its operations.

Scales of Relevance: Forrest-Thomson Reading Mendelssohn

The title 'Posies for sophists' comes from Mendelssohn's poem 'Ship in a bottle', which begins as an ekphrastic description of a ship in a bottle on a hot day.[2] The 'melting' quality of the day spreads to the artefact as it too begins to melt, and then becomes more abstract, as the poem moves on to think about ornamentation and attraction. Groups of people, potential audiences, are evoked and implicated: 'little girls', 'big men', 'white giants', culminating, in the second-last line, with 'posies for sophists, trimmed around rare heads'. The role of the 'sophist' began as a performer of political poetry, and eventually evolved into the kind of itinerant teacher scorned by Plato and his followers for, among other faults, asking to be paid for philosophical instruction.[3] The word has since acquired the association of a peddler in clever but ultimately meaningless talk. However, to assume we know what group Mendelssohn is talking about (academics, poets, intellectuals in general) would be committing Forrest-Thomson's cardinal sin of 'bad naturalisation' – that is, allowing ourselves to be distracted by the ways in which poetry points to the external world before we have analysed its uniquely poetic elements. This is the crux of Forrest-Thomson's system, as she explains in *Poetic Artifice*:

> The formal structure of a poem is not a step to the end of communicating ideas from other areas of discourse; it is the other areas of discourse, as they are fed through the level of meaning, that are tools for organising the formal structure of poems.[4]

What appears in a poem to be information about science, nature, love, or even poetry is, in Forrest-Thomson's view, primarily a tool for organising the aesthetic structures of the poem, and this is what differentiates the poetic from other forms of language. In order to arrive at 'good naturalisations' (justified readings) of poems, therefore, Forrest-Thomson requires us to begin by considering convention. Her own reading of John Ashbery's 'They Dream Only of America' begins with a discussion of 'the conventional level […] writing in stanzas so that he may be assured of the reader's applying the convention of lyric poetry. Having aroused these expectations […] he proceeds to disrupt them'.[5] Were we to ignore this, instead trying to read Ashbery only on the level of content, we would be presented with a set of apparently unconnected images, but the scaffold of stanza and reference we build with this initial level of reading helps us organise internal connections and make associations. (These references can also be external, allusive; Forrest-Thomson also considers in this section the text's reference to Whitman in the line 'thirteen million pillars of grass'.) We can apply this same process to Mendelssohn as well, identifying conventions to give us a structure to order our readings of her poems. In the case of 'Ship in a bottle',

the convention pointed to by the title is ekphrasis, albeit the kind of 'soft ekphrasis' of Forrest-Thomson's 'Conversation on a Benin Head', Amy Lowell's 'The Broken Fountain', or even Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'; the text is not an ekphrasis of a known, already admired work of art, but an anonymous and therefore unavailable one. As Emily Bilman writes, the central metaphorical operation of an ekphrastic poem 'defines the artwork as an entity, standing in a tense delicate balance between the reality it refers to and its capacity to *represent*'.[6] So the ekphrastic poem is not in fact describing reality; it is not a matter of content. Rather, the poem's formal qualities engage with and mediate the formal qualities of the work of art. A reading of 'Ship in a bottle' must consider this mediation; the poem, like the (imagined) artwork it ekphrasises (to coin a verb form), both aims to 'represent reality' (the ship) faithfully, but also sets itself perverse challenges (the bottle). However, without the bottle, the ship would not be the enigma that it is. It would be mere representation, without the frisson of *how did it come to be?*

The next 'level', or set of resources, that Forrest-Thomson asks us to consider is the phonological/visual. Although the most obvious is the assonance and sibilance of *posies* and *sophists*, and the visual effect of the inversion of the positions of 'p' and 's', the poem is full of affinities and slippages that, like the verbal tricks of sophistry, mock and undermine the relationship between signifier and signified. When one line describes 'the nespera that inspired insipid iced lollipops', the image of the nespera (loquat) ices is not the most remarkable thing about the line; it is the closeness of 'inspired' to 'insipid', and the oddness of the word choice. If the lollipops are actually made of nespera, then 'inspired' is a catachrestic choice, putting the ingredient and product at too great a remove; if the point is that they contain artificial nespera flavours, then 'inspired' is an ironic but not inaccurate usage. Either way, the closeness of the words actually distances the referents. Later in the poem, the following lines appear, the first of which is the last line in the poem to begin with a capital letter, marking out some sort of final section: 'Stretching limousines to the length of juggernauts, | some have clutched their jugular veins'. The way the line organizes itself around an opposition between two types of car suggests a class conflict; 'limousines', a cliché symbol of wealth, become 'juggernauts', military vehicles. In turn, the organisation across the two lines, with both beginning with the same phoneme and the paired noun phrases 'juggernauts'/'jugular veins' each at the end, encourages reading them together as a unit. This would underscore the class conflict reading; juggernauts threaten the vulnerable throats of 'some'. The choice of 'clutched' alongside a symbol of wealth suggests *clutching one's pearls* – a traditionalist's shock at something the rest of society no longer finds shocking.

The image brings tradition and wealth together, suggesting the fixedness of class hierarchies and the violence that has been employed in attempts to disrupt them. As we can see from two brief examples, rather than adding emphasis or interest to a patiently explained metaphor, these phonological similarities furnish connections between words linked not by the orthodoxy of meaning but by 'new', almost flippant connections. These are hardly unique to Mendelssohn, but what she does with it here is to connect it to form. The ship is 'melting'/'sweltering', the cure is 'inspired'/'insipid'/'iced' 'lollipops'/'pips', and this danger of juggernauts and jugulars is shunted to the end of the lines along with 'freeze', another connection back to the idea of heat. Moreover, these slippages are the main mechanism of the poem's ekphrasis; they are the fine details of the ship which bring it alive even at a scale and in an environment (that of the bottle) which undermines any would-be illusion of its reality.

Next on Forrest-Thomson's list is syntax; we read the way a poem manipulates word order to create and open ambiguities and disruptions, and also to foreclose other possibilities. One crucial line for this is, once again, the title of this paper: 'posies for sophists, trimmed around rare heads'. The syntax is crucially ambiguous: which are trimmed, the posies or the sophists? And to whom do these heads belong, the sophists or the posies? There are also alternative possible meanings of 'to trim' – the heads of the non-rare flowers which make up most of the posies could be cut off, or the sophists could be having their hair styled or decorated with laurel-like 'posies', both image and homophone (poesy/posy) suggesting that they are celebrated poets. This creates a matrix of possible meanings suggesting everything from honouring the poet-sophists to poetry as a balm created by the wounds of 'trimming' sophistry with philosophy ('posies for [those] sophists [who have been] trimmed around [their] rare heads'). All these possibilities coexist and hang together within the line; much like the network of similarities between signifiers discussed above, they are the fine detail of the poem that allows it to evoke a wider set of external references while not depending on them.

These three 'levels' – convention, phonology, syntax – are the beginning stages of Forrest-Thomson's stratified conception of 'poetic artifice'. From there she is about to let us ascend to the lofty heights of the semantic and thematic levels (what we usually think of as the text's 'meaning'), but it is worth pausing briefly to consider this division of the schema into two categories, which we might call the technical and the meaningful. Forrest-Thomson's use of the term 'non-meaningful' to describe technical or formal aspects of poetry seems to imply that these aspects do not contribute to the meaning of the poem. But non-meaningful is not the same,

for Forrest-Thomson, as 'meaningless' – worthless, to be ignored or discarded. Non-meaningful elements are rather those which are unique to poetic language, although paradoxically they do have a role to play in putting across the impressions or 'meanings' that we gain from a poem. The division between the non-meaningful and information-giving aspects of language is a necessary fiction in order to preserve the illusion that poems 'mean' in the sense that other language does – an essential distinction for the critic in arriving at readings that take in every aspect of the poem, or as *Poetic Artifice* has it, 'good naturalisation'.

In theory, Forrest-Thomson's system allows some poems to have a stable non-meaningful existence – those which enter as state of 'suspended naturalisation', in which although there is no stable reference to the 'external world', 'we can still observe the interaction and mutual reinforcement of the various types of pattern in that poem'.[7] She first derives this from French structuralist poet and *Tel Quel* contributor Denis Roche's prose work *Eros énergumène*. Roche proposes what he calls a 'new scansion' (in Forrest-Thomson's translation), which seems to be a model for Forrest-Thomson's treatment of the technical levels of a poem. This would be the practice not of counting syllables and stress or quantity, but of 'pulsational alternations' in the 'energy' of a poem.[8] As such, it may be a useful tool for reading a resistant, elliptical poem, but it leaves us with unresolved issues about the poem's relationship to knowledge. What capacity do poems have to convey knowledge if, as Roche writes, they 'smoothly empty themselves of' all 'semantic meaning'? Forrest-Thomson, in building a theory of poetic operations which accommodates this, sees herself as opposing a model of poetry-as-natural in favour of poetry-as-artifice. This is what enables us to deploy poetry as an aesthetic and political resistance to the power structures inherent in attempts to convey 'knowledge'.

One of her main points of reference for such an aesthetic in practice is Ashbery, as we have seen; as well as his disruptive deployment of the conventional stanza, she also admires his syntax for a similar reason: that it is both disjointed and continuous enough to force the reader to recognise that 'meaning' is being used as part of formal organisation rather than as an authorial 'purpose' of the text. An Ashbery poem is able to deploy metapoetic references *without* letting this govern the 'thematic synthesis', the overall impression of the poem once all the elements have been taken into consideration at the end of the reading process. Ashbery is able to draw on the world without breaking the spell of artifice and distracting the reader into one 'meaning'.[9] She takes the line 'mystery you don't want surrounded by the real' as her example, suggesting that this represents 'the whole process of artifice', the poem-mystery surrounded by, but separate from, the 'real' world. Likewise, her reading of

Plath's 'Last Words' centres around how '[t]he reader's knowledge of death, [burial], the traditional place of the moon in the poetic imagination are all absorbed by the new experimentation', that is, this artifice-centred poetics.[10] Moreover, she says, this process shows that there will always be temporary, partial contexts for thematic syntheses before they return to 'the separate planet of Artifice'.[11] We can apply this to Mendelssohn not only in 'Ship in a bottle', but in her other work as well; her poems are not necessarily 'about' poetry, but they can disrupt conventional knowledge transmission and lead us in how to read poetry at the same time. In the next section, we will look at the model of reading that we are led into by Mendelssohn's work.

Mendelssohnian Reading: Scansion, Irony, Metapoesis

A 'Mendelssohnian' mode of reading would be one that is guided by Mendelssohn's theoretical understanding of writing as she practiced it. There are clues that might direct such an approach in those of her poems that mention poetry, as in the untitled opening poem of *viola tricolor* when she describes 'the young girl taken from a trained woman, | whose poetry was mocked as a man's', and the 'revolutionary command' she receives 'to train her poetry into ice'.[12] Later, the 'young woman' poet reappears in another untitled poem, and her writing is described as something which 'has been written better a long time before' – and yet, some discovery is being made, some knowledge produced by 'a young woman's searching her feeling | into intelligibility, as an object, an extrojection, something it deserved | unacknowledged as it was'.[13] The unusual grammar of 'searching her feeling into intelligibility', suggests that the search *moves* feeling into intelligibility, and makes it an 'object' of study about which knowledge could be gathered. In the context of those opening lines and the attempt 'to train her poetry into ice', this seems ironic; Mendelssohn is not seeking an icily detached or academic poetry, but a kind of 'sweltering', seeping object (as we saw in 'Ship in a bottle') which exchanges materials with its reader and surroundings. I want now to look at three elements of Mendelssohn's style with a view to constructing the kind of reading practice she seems to encourage: scansion (in the broad, 'new' sense described by Roche); irony, and what its function might be beyond humour; and finally the metapoetic, or self-commentary.

A close reading of some Mendelssohn lines, here from the poem 'in medéa mé', can take into account some of Roche/Forrest-Thomson's 'pulsations'.

> it was a good play, that man had a lot of experience
>
> the ripple in the skin reminded me of sheepfolds in sunlight,

not that i would, at my age, run a few thousand acres on gin

Bitter wit begins at omega, which gate will he pass in by

I followed a few writers for a time in the local literary news

It's like watching a kid take to the hills, or a colt stagger to its feet.[14]

This poem sets up from the beginning an interest in scansion – of the traditional kind rather than the 'pulsational mingling' kind, although this can be applied, as we shall see. The title, 'in medéa mé', is marked with accents, but they are in the wrong position to be Greek or Latin accents. One of the aspects of Forrest-Thomson's first, 'conventional' level of artifice is allusion, and allusions here include those to Medea, the tragic mother figure, and *in media res*, the technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of things. Moreover, the traditional opposite of *in media res*, is *ab ovo*, 'from the egg', meaning to begin a story with the earliest events, and the suggested presence of this term compounds the motherly association.

Consider first the rhythmic and alliterative patterns of resonance set up in the second line of this extract: 'ripple in skin' and 'sheepfolds in sunlight' are linked by syntax. The semantic similarity of 'ripple' and 'fold' is balanced by the consonances in 'ski*n*' and '*sun*light'; exposing the arbitrary nature of the metaphor, this is one of Roche's 'pulsations', sound coming forward as the semantic meaning 'empties' itself, although the 'empty' word may not be the best term. Even though 'in' means something entirely different in each case – skin as the medium for the ripple versus sheepfolds (with)in the area on which the sun shines – their syntactical parallelism lets us consider and expand our definitions of the word. In a way, the sheepfolds are a medium for experiencing the sunlight – the sunny pastoral surroundings may be more affecting, and certainly are more conventionally poetic, than sun on concrete. In fact, rather than 'smoothly emptying', the semanticity 'seeps' into apparently inert or instrumental words like prepositions, which acquire new meanings as they act as a transmission medium for the pulsations.

Rewarding readings of Mendelssohn will acknowledge these kinds of moves and are aware that they are constantly exposing flaws in the view of poetic language as primarily representational. In order to demonstrate this, Jon Clay offers a deliberate counterexample by reading a Mendelssohn poem, 'underground river.', according to what are referred to as 'conventional representationalist assumptions'. This is purposely and necessarily a failed (or at any rate frustrated) reading; it is what Forrest-Thomson would call 'bad naturalisation', attempting immediately to derive a 'representationalist' outcome – 'the poem can be regarded as a representation

of the poet's feelings of loss'.[15] However, as Clay points out, the 'more satisfying' reading would consider 'the aesthetic or sensible relationship between the poem and its reader'.[16] While not a textbook Forrest-Thomsonian reading, Clay's analysis begins with a focus on conventions such as lyric address (without an understanding of Mendelssohn's use of this, the poem would be impossible to discuss) and, crucially, of stress. In Mendelssohn, Clay writes,

> stress brings together elements of signification with musical force, producing a dissonance and a subversive resonance that undercuts what might appear to be the dominant conceptual or signifying elements of recognition [...] the lines are composed as *a block of sensations*, of affects and percepts, with the former to some extent emerging from the latter.[17]

This cannot but remind us of Roche's 'pulsational mingling', but in a sense that Forrest-Thomson fails to carry over from Roche: an interest in the critical potential in the notion of 'sensation'. Indeed, she mocks T. E. Hulme's desire to move past poetry and into sensation: 'we should all be dying to get rid of poetry to enter empathetic, kinaesthetic and inarticulate rapture'.[18] But the idea of rapturous reading is present in Roche, and indeed in French literary theory of the period. Forrest-Thomson knew well the earlier work of Roland Barthes but does not appear to have read his *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), which codified the notion of *jouissance* in writing. *Jouissance* is usually translated as 'bliss', but Armine Kotin Mortimer makes a persuasive case for rendering it as 'rapture'.[19] For both Barthes and Roche, there is a rapturous, *erotic* potential in writing which overflows what a linguistic or technical explanation can account for. Barthes finds the erotic in the repeated and the unexpected, in the half-concealed, in the distracting: 'in certain texts, words glisten, they are distracting, incongruous apparition'.[20] Roche, meanwhile, imagines the erotic potential of 'writing by elaborate pulsations that are difficult to restrain without amplification and incantation that would deform them'.[21] There is a great deal of difference between these two conceptions of the possibilities of writing, such that fully reconciling Barthes and Roche is beyond the scope of this essay, but both name as 'erotic' the overflowing potential affects that can be produced from incongruity and resistance to typical modes of reading. There is a dimension of text, either 'empathetic' or 'kinaesthetic', which is not included in the way *Poetic Artifice* breaks down the operations of texts, but which we may find in the articulations of a Mendelssohn poem.

More applicable to a Mendelssohnian reading is Forrest-Thomson's treatment of irony. Particularly when she shifts into a conventional register, Mendelssohn often

has recourse to postmodern irony, which Clare Colebrook distinguishes from an earlier notion of irony as detachment. The conventional ironic text would 'foreground the difference between the stable use of language in a context and the ironic uses which are contrary to recognised meaning'.[22] Postmodern irony, in taking into account that no utterance or 'mark' can ever be completely separated from its context (or else, as Derrida writes, it would 'no longer be a mark'), allows the multi-level operation of poems that is so key to Forrest-Thomson's poetic artifice: it 'operates on the level of extended meaning which the words would have in prose' as well as the way in which they fit into a poem.[23] Roche describes a poetry that functions as 'the most fulfilled form of irony, or scepticism'; when language tugs at its potential alternative contexts, it introduces that scepticism, and allows the poem to operate on two levels at once.[24] It says something as a way of saying 'this could be said', 'people will say this', 'this remark is out there in the world', and the poet functions as collector and curator rather than speaker. Forrest-Thomson writes of Ashbery that he 'can vary his rhythm to include the cadences of "everyday speech" […] without leaving any doubt that his external contexts are absorbed', which is to say, without giving us the impression that he is genuinely engaging in an 'everyday' use of language, like communication or conversation.[25] This also applies to Mendelssohn's use of such fragments; in the last two lines of 'in medéa mé', it is as if she descends and speaks straightforwardly with us: 'I followed a few writers for a time in the local literary news | It's like watching a kid take to the hills, or a colt stagger to its feet.' Giving two examples here which are so similar underscores the sardonic nature of this attention. Both compare the young poets to a young four-legged, hoofed animal learning to walk; what comes from attributing the slightly different experiences to slightly different animals? This imperfect doubling acts out a scene of the pastoral poet caught mid-composition, providing alternates, but both are provided in order to foreground the fact that the pastoral, although it seems 'natural' for poetry in both subject matter and form, is as artificial as anything else. However, this only serves to highlight a quality Forrest-Thomson believes all pastoral has: it 'is the genre which asserts connection on the conventional level, which is granted, by convention, the right to […] unify the natural with the highly artificial'.[26] Just as pastoral creates a sense of 'nature' that both poet and reader understand to be idealised, poetry in general creates a sense of immanent experience which both poet and reader understand to be artificial. Forrest-Thomson defines 'technique' as the practice of the anti-sincere, regarding 'sincerity' as both 'the opponent of Artifice as the determinant of role and technique, and the accomplice of Naturalisation that wants a "message" and ignores technique'.[27] Postmodern irony is sincerity's corollary, the opponent of naturalisation and the accomplice of artifice.

So, in a case such as 'in medéa mé', to ask whether Mendelssohn is 'being sincere' is the wrong question: the sincere attempt to capture what it is like to watch the young writers *is* being visibly enacted, but it is also used to underscore the faux-naturalness (underscored by the pastoral source of the metaphor) of poetic composition and becoming-poet.

Also in this mode of metapoetic pastoral is the speaker of *Bernache Nonnette*'s self-definition as, not a poetess, but a 'potato'. *Bernache Nonnnette* references poetry throughout; Simon Perril comments on the speaker's 'virtuoso invocation to her powers': 'Bernache Nonnette vous tu est una rheteric au tutu au tutu tulle una vraiment viellevieux heretic.'[28] Perril describes the word 'rheteric' as 'a neologistic hybrid of rhetoric and heresy: a figuring of poetry as a fundamental disagreement and opposition, a spirit of contrariness and contestation'.[29] Indeed, poetry is by its very nature a disagreement – there can be no settled or total truth-statement in the poem, yet the poet works on, even when her project 'reads inapplicable'.[30] This is how we must interpret any 'metapoetic' reading: not for the truth or falsity of what it says about the nature of poetry in general, but as a contestation of the individual truths we as readers may try to assign to that particular poem. So if we try to read *Bernache Nonnette* as a kind of *ars poetica*, picking out particular lines to suit this purpose – 'the most beautiful poems speak to us | Yet we know they were written in the wrong country at the wrong time | When poets were forced to cross borders' – which might embolden us to read the text as a series of coded descriptions of the writing of poetry, we will be rebuffed – as in the line, two pages later, 'a clever poetess would flee i am a potato'.[31] On a semantic level, this is funny, but another level is added by the letters and sounds the words share (p-o-t) – it is as if we have made a mistake and she is correcting us, putting herself in the earth instead of on the shelf. But the slippage isn't poet/potato, which would have the same phonological effect; syntax comes into it too, 'poetess'. As well as wryly drawing attention to the difference in a poet-speaker's subject-position when she is a woman, the '-ess' also serves the function of bringing the words up to a similar length, aligning them on the visual/phonological level; this is even closer on the text line, 'my clothes are made of potatoes', and this forms a connection between 'poetess' and 'clothes' – her role as the unserious 'potato' has to do with how she is seen and how she is made to present herself. Perril later notes that 'the protagonist is frequently the victim of attempts to induct her into a world or, often violently, punish her refusal to join it'.[32] By refusing to be 'clever' and 'flee', she remains in a space at risk (whether physical, social, or artistic) and becomes a 'potato'. These lines encapsulate the Mendelssohnian poetic: affective meaning carried by apparently arbitrary pulsations and associations, and ironic, metapoetic fragments of narration.

Brouillon: Mendelssohn Reading Forrest-Thomson

Having examined Forrest-Thomson's theory of reading as it applied to Mendelssohn and considered what kind of reading Mendelssohn's poetics encourages, we can now use the reading practice this teaches us to read a Forrest-Thomson poem. We have seen that there is something in Mendelssohn which, although possibly gestured towards by Roche, is not accounted for by *Poetic Artifice* – a 'scansion' of associations. This is because Forrest-Thomson, as well as being a formalist, is a rationalist, albeit a troubled one, while Mendelssohn is decidedly anti-rationalist, as Simon Perril has shown. He writes of the epigraph to *Bernache nonette*: 'As if to flout her opposition to reductive rationalist discourse, Mendelssohn-as-Lake prefaces her chapbook with an entry from Sartre's *Notebooks from a Phoney War*: "J'écris les brouillons, les yeux fermés". (I write unmethodically, eyes closed.)'[33] Forrest-Thomson's system, however, is for readers, not writers; she wants us to read with our eyes *especially* open – that is, methodically – but says nothing about the inner lives of poets, at least not in *Poetic Artifice*. Likewise, Mendelssohn is not talking about how many drafts a poet produces (she produced many); her use of the Sartre remark is here a comment on method, or rather of unmethod – *brouillon*, the rough draft. Mendelssohn does not appear to mean by this the co-existence of drafts rewriting or one on top of the other, which is the poetics of (for instance) Rachel Blau DuPlessis' long poem *Drafts*; indeed, it seems to be the inverse of this. No matter how many times it was, historically, rewritten, each poem has a quality of roughness, and is led not by poetic 'vision' but by 'feel' – in other words, by an attention to the 'new scansion' Roche describes and for which *Poetic Artifice* fails to account. In other words: a Mendelssohnian reading is conducted with our eyes closed (or at least, not especially open), moving along by a feel for the way in which a poem's 'pulsations' of shape, sound, and syntax work even as semantic meaning recedes. As we saw with the final lines of 'in medéa mé', this happens when irony and sincerity push and pull against one another as a tool or 'accomplice' of poetic artifice, but for the *brouillon* unmethod to work, artifice must shed some of the highly determined character it has in Forrest-Thomson's understanding, and allow a freer, more impulsive passage between 'levels' of meaning-construction.

We can demonstrate what this method looks like with a Forrest-Thomson poem. Some of her texts seem designed to be read according to the principles set out in *Poetic Artifice*; indeed some, like 'Pastoral' and 'Not Pastoral Enough', one of the sets of pairs of poems from *On the Periphery* (1976), explicitly engage with its categories of artifice. Others, like the popular 'Cordelia', seem to reward a more straightforward narrative or confessional reading, albeit with allusions even at the level of syntax (what Gareth Farmer calls an 'allusion grid') and paratactic non sequiturs that demand an eye to

artifice as well.[34] Here, I want to demonstrate Mendelssohnian reading with a poem which resists many of Forrest-Thomson's own strategies and which is particularly difficult because, while allusive and syntactically dense, confessional strategies are also foreclosed, unlike in 'Cordelia'. The poem is 'Approaching the Library', which depicts a journey which leads to the library but also through a dense field of allusion, referring to Wallace Stevens and Gustave Flaubert, to grammar and rhetorical figures, as much as to physical features of the landscape. Its significance is enhanced when we consider Forrest-Thomson's situation of many of her poems in and of the journey 'from typewriter | to Library'.[35] The 'library' of the title provides a framework for all of the allusions and sources of imagery, down to mundane minutiae like the cover of a notebook, which becomes part of the sound and rhythmic flow of the poem.

The scansion here is easier to parse than in Mendelssohn; certain patterns are produced. The poem ends with a figure making her way 'to the library, carrying her *Heffers Cantab Students | Notebook, ref. 140, punched for filing*'.[36] The found language of the italicized text is lineated into the poem, and even has a regular rhythm, falling easily into trochees. Contrast this with Mendelssohn's irregular but 'pulsing' scansion – 'the rípple in the skín remínded me of shéepfolds in súnlight' – which nevertheless contributes to effects such as the unlikely parallelism in this line, discussed above. However, what Mendelssohn's example (although I have codified it here using Forrest-Thomson's translation of Roche) teaches us to look for is still found here: other uses of language worked into the pulse of the poem. The mundane language of the notebook cover, in being read as poetry, is 'emptied' of its semantic meaning – whether it is 'punched for filing' or not is immaterial to the effect and its purpose in the poem, which is as a rhythmic pattern. And yet, this is at the service of a thematic synthesis – the journey towards the library ends with this emptying, as if to show us that poetry will not be claiming the knowledge-status of the library's contents. An uncollected early poem, 'Catalog' (*sic*), lists seven canonical texts of religion, science, and philosophy followed by catalogue card numbers and ends with the line 'shuffle well before commencing play'.[37]

As we have seen before, Mendelssohn and Forrest-Thomson are perhaps most closely related in their use of irony. Like Mendelssohn double-pastoralising the writers as goat/colts, the speaker of 'Approaching the Library' ironises the utility of poetic language, which she says feeds and clothes her 'after I had, in a moment of abstraction, fallen | into Holme Fen Engine Ditch'.[38] She also adopts the pose that poetry 'comes naturally', a position we know from her theory she scorns; her ironic take on it in this poem, however, is that it is 'easy': 'it played into one's hands, the unpremeditated paysage, | as Stevens said'. This is likely a reference to Stevens' poem

'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', whose titular character's first line is 'I am the angel of reality'.[39] 'Paysans' are peasants, and so 'paysage' is not only countryside, but an archaic version; 'unpremeditated' tells us this too, implying that countryside is usually, or today, premeditated, schemed into being like a crime, and hearkens back to the primitive Arcadia of pastoral. The speaker suggests that the countryside is easy, unplanned, and real, which is ironic, because when we try to experience the 'real' countryside and thereby achieve pure poetic abstraction, we fall into engine ditches, and the same would happen with poetry. (Compare this with the 'kinaesthetic rapture' Forrest-Thomson mentions, also ironically, in *Poetic Artifice*.) In the following stanza, 'we are rescued from | the abstract ditch we dig with our fundamental | disagreement about the proper form for a picnic'. Attention to 'poetic diction' ('ditch'-on) or artifice, it is implied, helps resolve these issues of abstraction, pulling us back from the transcendental, pastoral brink. Much as in the final lines of Mendelssohn's 'in médea mé', here pastoral is ultimately an opportunity for irony, the poem creating its effects by the way in which it is offset from the 'external world'.

The issue of how this poem arranges its metapoetic comments has already largely been answered, then: with irony. However, one of the oddities of Forrest-Thomson's system in *Poetic Artifice* is that she does not acknowledge the metapoetic as a distinct category. Although she often acknowledges that poems are talking about poetry, she does not group these occurrences or see them as stemming from the same impulse. By contrast, as we have seen, in Mendelssohn the metapoetic references tend to be spread widely across a long poem or pamphlet, as in *viola tricolor*. This dispersal of metapoetic figures and descriptions linked by certain elements of style allows us to follow it throughout a poem without the poem becoming 'about poetry'. Forrest-Thomson does something similar here: 'Approaching the Library' takes external contexts from the life of someone who thinks about poetry (notebook, country walk, casual quotations from Stevens and Flaubert), but the poem is about that life, and not 'about' its own construction or a general idea of poetry. This makes the poem more 'about poetry' than in Mendelssohn's version, so neat is Forrest-Thomson's integration of the self-conscious thematics into the poem. This also means it lacks the delicate network of links in Mendelssohn, the gentle tug on the string between distant metapoetic references in a poem or series of poems which encompasses a wide range of ideas. Although these strategies contrast, both avoid 'treating of the subject' of poetry in a manner that produces an effect of settled knowledge. Forrest-Thomson approaches and leaves the library, but she is not in it with us, and she does not want us to encounter her in it. Reading through Mendelssohn helps us maintain this separation because of the way a poem like *Bernache Nonnette* teaches us to see

metapoetic references as a network of internal references rather than information-giving pointers to the external.

Conclusion

In this comparative study, two modes of poetics and poetry-reading have emerged: the scale of relevance and the *brouillon*. Forrest-Thomsonian reading follows a prescribed and exhaustive pattern which lays bare the elements of artifice before allowing us to come to a 'thematic synthesis'; Mendelssohnian artifice obscures and disperses the thematic end result and only responds to a sensitivity to the 'feel' of her lines, in the manner we have explored. In this way, they appear compatible, but attempting to look at them with the same critical tools produces a certain friction. Mendelssohn's style engenders a kinaesthetic or *jouissant* response for which Forrest-Thomson does not account, and Forrest-Thomson's is system-readable in a way that makes it difficult to experience the Mendelssohnian 'felt' connection between or across techniques. However, both writers are united by more than what divides them: the offering-up of poems, and ways of thinking about poems, which suggest alternatives to the structures of knowledge, and help us begin to describe the shapes and operations of those alternatives.

Notes

[1] Anna Mendelssohn, 'Ship in a bottle', *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Folio and Equipage, 2000), p. 122.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Håkan Tell, 'Sages at the Games: Intellectual Displays and Dissemination of Wisdom in Ancient Greece', *Classical Antiquity* 26.2 (October 2007), 249–275 (p. 251 n. 2); James Fredal, 'Why Shouldn't the Sophists Charge Fees?', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38.2 (Spring 2008), 148–170 (pp. 149, 155).

[4] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Gareth Farmer (Bristol: Shearsman, 2016), p. 43.

[5] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 216.

[6] Emily Bilman, *Modern Ekphrasis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 3.

[7] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 38.

[8] Denis Roche, 'Preface to *Eros énergumène*', trans. by Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems and Translations* (London: Allardyce, Barnett, Publishers, 1990), 149–151 (p. 150).

[9] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 214.

[10] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 221.

[11] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 87.

[12] Lake, *viola tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993), p. [1].

[13] Lake, *viola tricolor*, p. [8].

[14] Mendelssohn, 'in medéa mé, *Implacable Art*, p. 4.

[15] Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 44.

[16] Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, p. 45.

[17] Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze*, pp. 56–7.

[18] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 61.

[19] Armine Kotin Mortimer, *The Gentlest Law: Roland Barthes's The Pleasure of the Text* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 24–8.

[20] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), p. 42.

[21] Roche, 'Preface to *Eros énergumène*', p. 150.

[22] Clare Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 105.

[23] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 96; Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 11.

[24] Roche, 'Preface to *Eros énergumène*', p. 151.

[25] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 214.

[26] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 167.

[27] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 146.

[28] Grace Lake, *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993), p. [2].

[29] Perril, '"Kinked Up Like It Wants to Bark": Contemporary British Poetry at the Tomb of the *Poète Maudit*' in Abigail Lang and David Nowell Smith (eds.), *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 95–108 (p. 100).

[30] Lake, quoted in Perril, p. 101.

[31] Lake, 'Silk & Wild Tulips', *Bernache Nonnette*, p. [5]; p. [7].

[32] Perril, p. 99.

[33] Perril, p. 99.

[34] Gareth Farmer, 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson's "Cordelia", Tradition and the Triumph of Artifice', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 1.1 (2009), 55–77 (p. 64).

[35] Forrest-Thomson, 'Antiquities' in *Collected Poems*, p. 85. 'Approaching the Library' has, like many poems in *On the Periphery*, a 'twin' poem, 'Leaving the Library'; while doubtless the relationship is of interest, I believe that each poem can usefully be discussed in its own right without losing vital effects.

[36] Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, p. 120. Emphasis in the original.

[37] Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, p. 56.

[38] Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, p. 120.

[39] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 435.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.