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Fleurs du Travail, Fleurs Sublimes: Anna Mendelssohn's Involute Tulips

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Situating Anna Mendelssohn within the nineteenth-century, highly feminised genres of floral poetry, anthologies, and dictionaries, this essay argues that flowers become a means by which Mendelssohn performs feminist oscillations between sentimentality and sublimity. Through genetic criticism and close reading, the essay attends particularly to Mendelssohn's archived and published instantiations of tulips from 1974 to 1995, culminating in her great poem 'Silk & Wild Tulips' (1995). By tracking floral motifs in Mendelssohn's work, the essay unearths the thorough labour of her editorial processes, as well as some innately conservative strands of her artistry and ideology. At their most ideal, Mendelssohn's flowers stand for an inarticulate, as-yet-unattainable, and distinctly feminised form of communication, and in this guise, they are a catalyst by which Mendelssohn strives to redefine her masculinist avant-garde inheritance. Numerous unpublished archival materials are referenced, among them, Mendelssohn's prison diaries, marginalia, pamphlets, prose typescripts, and poem manuscripts.



doing winding flowers / glad, given markers¹

rather than bloom out to die / deep blue irises fold in tighter²

*... so she takes to the hills / in a land with no night, all light,
in a wandering with primroses / acurling round her feet.³*

give me some books which aren't about fields / give me a bunch of primroses.⁴

Anna Mendelssohn died on 16 November 2009. Through the cold winter that followed, a devoted group of five friends spent weekend after weekend excavating the garden shed where Mendelssohn lived in the last years of her life.⁵ The shed was a teeming, tangled overgrowth of books, music, pianos, furniture, and clothing replete with its own ecosystems, a colony of silverfish among them. In her late correspondence, Mendelssohn often prefaced her return address with 'Kiosque de Jardin', a satiric name giving a manor-like gravitas to her uninsulated, unplumbed accommodation. (My heart, my body destroyed', Mendelssohn writes far more mournfully in a 1997 poem that refers to this same shed, 'this is fact. as factual as an estate of many acres', as real as the 'expansive gardens' and closed doors of academia.)⁶ Over dinner with one of the friends, Kate Wheale, in August 2017, I mentioned that I was writing an essay about Mendelssohn and flowers, and she replied enthusiastically: 'She loved flowers. Loved them.' Mendelssohn lived with Wheale for two years in the 1980s, and Wheale told me that when Mendelssohn prepared for poetry readings, she regularly pinned silk flowers in her hair or on her person. 'On anyone else', Wheale observed, 'it would have looked ridiculous. But Anna carried it off'. Like any avant-gardist, Mendelssohn was susceptible to flashes of romanticism; after all, what is more idyllic than the high modernist belief that art might change the world?⁷ Privileging transgression over morality, erotics over love, aggression over compassion, early twentieth-century avant-gardists outwardly repressed 'the debates of heart and mind [...] that had been valued by [Victorian] domestic fiction' even as their art was often replete with anxious 'decisions and revisions', fretful desires for a benevolent 'she' who might tidy chaotic modern worlds into comfortable sense.⁸ Irascibly aware that no aproned woman will ever dote on her, Mendelssohn is an avant-gardist who lingers over and reinhabits the category feminine, challenging its vulnerability to slight and violation, celebrating its fecundities, its 'pumps and white stockings', 'daffodil dress[es]', and exquisite flowers.⁹ And is incredulous about those who don't: in a poem about a too-personal grilling by an official at the benefits office, Mendelssohn writes: 'she would turn geraniums into | ironing boards'. To miss or misunderstand the fleeting beauty of even common or garden variety flowers, to insist upon routine domesticity before quotidian aesthetics: for Mendelssohn, this

absurdity is unendurable pathos, a catalyst for outrage.¹⁰ Mendelssohn shares Charles Baudelaire's belief – one that became foundational to modernist practice – that '[f]or most of us [...] nature has no existence save by reference to utility', meaning that 'the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted'.¹¹

Diminutive qualities have long been ascribed to women and flowers alike, among them, 'smallness of stature, fragility of mind and body, and impermanence of beauty'.¹² Less delicately, both have shared the status of commodity traded to reinforce social and kinship bonds.¹³ Mendelssohn was alive to the tradition by which flowers were metonyms for the womanly subject. '[O] lady bower, ragged white frayed | chrysanthemum flower' writes Mendelssohn in 1983; a 1993 Mendelssohn pamphlet is *viola tricolor* or 'wild pansy', its eponymous speaker a young girl who appears in the first poem and will reappear – heroic, pained – at the outset of a subsequent collection in 1996.¹⁴ Marginal notes in drafts of *viola tricolor* indicate that Mendelssohn was reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning and botany as she brought the volume to fruition.¹⁵ For Barrett Browning, as for Mendelssohn, the feminised flower embodies aesthetic pleasure and a silenced, unstinting desire to become what Gertrude Stein calls a creator of one's own time.¹⁶ In 1844, Barrett Browning writes a poem about a lone white rose 'on a mission, | to declare the coming vision' of spring by blooming early to 'foretel[1]' the legions of blossom *en route*.¹⁷ Striving for an acclaimed uniqueness, the rose flourishes unacknowledged by trees without leaves to wave, by birds too busy nesting to see her, and finds herself 'misknown', relegated to Stein's 'history of the refused in the arts'.¹⁸ Enter a male poet who perceives a fellow traveller in the leaf-dropping rose, whose arrival in an 'unprepared season' he believes echoes poets' "'Vaunting to come before | Our own age evermore'". 'Though the world stand dumb around us | All unable to expound us' the poet counsels, the rose must 'be silent song': reject audience, take pleasure in an assured, creative self that reflects the ultimate artist, God. Sympathetic, the male poet's voice nevertheless overtakes the latter half of 'A Lay of the Early Rose', bringing it to a didactic close as the rose quietly mourns her way toward death.¹⁹ Misunderstood, out-of-sync outlaws, rose and poet are vanguardists who anticipate a sublime vindication that will not come to pass in their lifetimes. Crediting Barrett Browning with her own drive for a feminist resuscitation of the term 'poetess', Mendelssohn is attuned to the vanguard alienation evinced in 'A Lay of the Early Rose', if less assured of the self-sufficient, spiritual pleasures proffered by the unheard female voice.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, the 'silent integrity' of the flower was thought to 'embellis[h] and validat[e]' the often unacknowledged 'integrity of women's lives'.²¹ By contrast, the late-twentieth century flowers that insist their way through Mendelssohn's highly experimental work refuse relegation to stripped, sentimentalised remainder. In Mendelssohn's writing, flowers are involute: an entangled, intricate, spiralled means of 'breaking through to

new form'.²² Mendelssohn identifies with feminised flower tropes that reached the height of their popularity in the nineteenth century, and this identification can speak to a pervasive traditional strain in her thinking. But where Barrett Browning's white rose is spoken for, Mendelssohn's flowers enunciate and powerfully call attention to their unwarranted exclusion. At times assaulted, at times submerged in saccharine, these flowers can embody the untapped sublimities of language, sublimities resolutely feminised as absented but ever-present possibilities.²³

Texts and flowers share etymologies: the page is a leaf; fascicles are book sections and 'flowers on little stalks variously inserted and subdivided'; the Greek 'anthologia' originally referred to collection of flowers.²⁴ In the nineteenth century, floral dictionaries were in vogue: akin to anthologies, these texts culminated in poems that were about and named called 'flowers'. In the same period, women's writing was regularly classified as natural, unpremeditated, spontaneous. In his preface to Dickinson's first published collection, Thomas Wentworth Higginson writes: "In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed".²⁵ By this account, Dickinson stumbles over her 'flowers', wrenches them from the ground, and delivers them to us precisely as found: wild serendipity eradicates willed propagation. Like Dickinson, Mendelssohn wrote an astonishing number of poems that remained uncirculated in her lifetime: I estimate that there are a minimum of five thousand poems in her archive at the University of Sussex alone. This colossal endeavour, equally matched by drawings and prose, begs the mortal reader's anxious need for reassurance: surely the work is impressionistic? Surely Mendelssohn simply stumbled over these writings, fully sprouted and ready to behold? The advent of Situationism in England in the late 1960s, or just as Mendelssohn began writing serious verse, furthers this response. The Situationist ethos of drifting, of 'free creativity', is consistent with the perception of Mendelssohn as recorder of a highly sensitised, pervasive stream of consciousness.²⁶ The radicalism and extremes of Mendelssohn's life and writings will continue to encourage over-determined biographical readings of her corpus, even as it is one of her fundamental editorial practices to excise or reformulate the first-person pronoun. What follows instantiates the patience required of her enormous, diverse body of work, one impossible to know in its entirety, resistant to encapsulation, and deserving of measured consideration. I aim here to bring into view the calculated labour that I observe Mendelssohn expending on her writing over four decades.²⁷ Mendelssohn shares decadent desires for exotic, improbable 'artificial flowers that imitated real ones', envisioning bouquets of sculptured linen, enamel, red velvet, and even petrol, but hers are not *fleurs du mal* as much as *fleurs du travail*.²⁸ Mendelssohn's geraniums will never be ironing boards.

Instead, refusing capitulation to the pragmatics of industry or capital, to a self-serving aesthetic dead-end, or to clichéd dismissal, Mendelssohn's flowers are returned to with persistent and winnowing care, pruned and grafted, edited and re-edited. The tulip encapsulates this endeavour: within the hothouse of Mendelssohn's archive and *oeuvre*, this flower is protected, emblematic of her processes, and pored over between 1974 and 1995.

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Flowers are monumental and ephemeral, doomed miracles, ever-fresh clichés. So it is that Wordsworth's agile, cheery host of daffodils is rather satisfyingly countered by Baudelaire's solitary rotten blossom: a decomposing female corpse sown in a stony bed, a stinking, fetid 'marvellous meat' upon which 'the sky cast an eye [...] | as over the flowers in bloom'. Baudelaire's 'A Carcass' relishes the grisly aftermath implied by Herrick's virginal rosebud gatherers, rejects the pervasive purity of Blake's sensual 'Lilly', and reminds us that a flower may be the most idealised of all things feminine, but is also catamenia, pulverulence, scum.²⁹ Uncoincidentally, Baudelaire's ill and wrong-headed flowers bloom alongside a nineteenth-century apex of 'the language of flowers' that began in Napoleonic France before journeying westward to England and the United States.³⁰ Fulfilling Victorian passions for typology and embellishment, English floral dictionaries proliferated from the 1840s onward, offering alphabetised lists of plants and the specific sentiments they evoke, followed rather doggedly by lists of sentiments and their representative flowers.³¹ An ABC of flowers might include: 'Andromeda: Self-Sacrifice'; 'Anemone: (Garden): Forsaken'; 'Bramble: Lowliness. Envy. Remorse'; 'Branch of Currants: You please all.'; 'Calceolaria: I offer you pecuniary assistance'; 'Carnation, yellow: Slighted love'.³² The genre was feminine: 'frequently encouraged to shy away from the harsh light of self-revelation and public scrutiny', women found that 'floral symbolism afforded a private way to express their thoughts to friends, lovers, and acquaintances'.³³ Floral dictionaries were also pretty ripostes to the exclusion of women from botany. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, women steadily gained stature in this science, prompting John Lindley (1799–1865) of London University to demand that a distinction be preserved between the "'polite botany'" of the woman "hobbyist" and the "'botanical science'" of their male counterparts.³⁴ Politeness won the day, as evinced by the introduction to Jane Wells Webb Loudon's *Botany for Ladies* (1840), written to assuage her 'old repugnance [...] to the Linnean system', a taxonomy considered both too difficult and too sexualised for female readers.³⁵ The expertise of Georgian women conversant with Latinate terms and natural history was thus transposed into: 'Tulip (yellow): Hopeless love.'³⁶ Women's interest in flowers brought their 'innate' moral respectability full circle: to inhale fresh scent was to sweeten temperament; to garden was to nurture; to mother was to root oneself and cultivate beauteous purity

and sweet temperaments.³⁷ But throughout the nineteenth century, in select hands, the rhetoric of flowers became, increasingly, a coded means of expressing and deferring complex thought, feelings, desires.³⁸ Christina Rossetti scratched scientific itches via her literary studies of flowers, and her poems consciously privilege humble weeds over love's roses and faith's lilies. Emily Dickinson and her contemporaries used flowers to denote illicit sexuality.³⁹ 'Cyclamen', a recognised signifier of lesbian desire, is notably absent from most floral dictionaries.⁴⁰ And, alongside Lydia Sigourney's *The Voice of Flowers* (1846) and Fanny Fern's *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1850) appears Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), its title page unabashedly portraying the intertwined tendrils and sprouting leaves common to women's books of verse. Rose is not always a rose is not always a rose is just not always a rose.⁴¹

'[Y]ou, having poetized over | my pain' Anna Mendelssohn writes in 1985, 'writ[e] over your hyacinths'.⁴² Impressionable blossom, fragile lyric subject, delicate lyric: 'Poems are frail beings' she states in notes filed with a manuscript, adding: 'I can't slam my poems down onto paper.' Treating poems as living entities and her equals, Mendelssohn demurs: 'However I did not create myself organically.'⁴³ Having read William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York*, Mendelssohn professes a desire 'to write a topological poem'. Once referring singularly to the botanical study of plant localities, topology combines the unplanned with the scientific; so too does Mendelssohn imagine her topological poem as 'both OPEN to chance, and systematic in research'. Further, she will '[r]ecord as much as is humanly possible' and '[r]efut[e] the notion that England could never produce a "Walt Whitman"'.⁴⁴ Coupled with her love of flowers, these aspirations have the tang of previous centuries. Often self-consciously, and at times not self-consciously enough, Mendelssohn's writing gestures to the open, gushing sentimentality that flowers can evoke, as in: 'Flowers are symbols of this love of mine.'⁴⁵ '[N]o substitute | in cliché' Mendelssohn writes in 1982, continuing:

write for the sake of writing
 is, is not true,
 an equatorial problem
 equations spell
 no one's land.
 upto this time
 constant factor?
 helps me to gather together.
 I liked all those people in one place.
 never closed but the static intervention.

miracle flower
 make play forget imaginable consolation
 consolidation

Rejecting the process of writing as reducible to either nineteenth-century maxim – art for art’s sake – or as solvable scientific problem, Mendelssohn foregrounds its open-ended capacity to assemble. At the centre of this poetic bouquet or garden is a ‘miracle flower’ that cautiously permits frivolity, creativity, recognition, situatedness.⁴⁶ In 1997, she will again answer the question of what constitutes art with a flower that is, in this instance, swooning and spectral:

this could not be art although it could not be denied,
 denunciation ripping off its red cap waving frantically
 in the perfume of mists and loneliness a wild cornflower
 faint against the strong blossoms of cultivation
 weak by naïve ardour loses presence to the refute in
 everything for lovely praise of dipping ghosts⁴⁷

Against denunciation, itself akin to a rage-red blossom, this isolated cornflower enters an alternate dimension where praise presides, albeit intermittently, as these complimentary ghosts dip in and out. The next stanza reinforces the erratic nature of this exchange, beginning: ‘in this dim and rise’. But the gorgeous phrase ‘weak by naïve ardour’ encapsulates the flower’s innocence, fragility, and desirous resilience, its capacity to be art in the face of resistances real, imagined, or unduly laboured.

Mendelssohn’s flowers can be too-beloved clichés, art, and the site of rewritings of the trope of woman as flower; here too, she follows in the wake of fin-de-siècle modernists such as Dickinson, whose poems about loyal female flowers have been interpreted as ripostes to the stereotype of female capriciousness.⁴⁸ In a 1988 Mendelssohn poem beginning ‘find one page evenly’, a ‘frustrated woman is down | by the river bank with page one | of “the universe” on her lap’.⁴⁹ The universe could be book or child, as within this public space, populated by parents and offspring, other ‘red-faced mothers’ are said to ‘tear away their titles’ whilst ‘thick-eyed’ fathers and mothers carry bags marked with the name of a now-defunct Cambridge bookstore, Heffers. As the frustrated woman reads, an ice-cream laden child ‘in all pink’ fixates upon her, her cold treat, and the local ducks; clearly, ‘[a]ll pink-er’ is as watched as she is watching. The female reader is distracted by the crowds, the scenery, and the prevalence of the male pronoun in her ‘text’: ‘Every time she reads ‘he’ she looks around | for help from the thoroughfare of strollers’. Pedestrians, walkers pushing

small people in buggies, individuals proliferating intellectually and reproductively: the single female reader, perhaps mother, seeks guidance from these outwardly successful examples of middle-class heteronormativity. But in its second half, the poem conflates bourgeois fixations – becoupled Cambridge sightseers and residents, the meticulous gardens of Cambridge colleges – with the messiness of fecundity and sexual desire. Clutching bags of books-cum-babies, mothers

[...] are grinned at by tourists
 who take traces of flower beds back
 to their coaches and wives, particularly,
 bestow an increasingly familiar tone
 of deep concern for white english geraniums
 onto their dun coloured suited husbands
 who slide down duvets with them
 crushing their heads gently against
 scandinavian linen, anxiously
 wondering whether the blue tickets did transport
 their ladies to the goddess farm by green bus.

Immaculately coloured, pure of origin, and inviolately domestic: figured as a ‘white english geranium’, the women’s concern is a staining agent, and in like inversion, these flower-feeling women are not moral, upright beauties but stalks flattenable by lust. This lust is tempered by a preoccupation with valuable commodities – watch the Scandinavian linen, darling – and by husbands’ inability to square sexual aggression with the need to preserve their wives as fragile, unblemished ideals. The final focus on colour – blue tickets, green bus – echoes the ‘[a]ll pink-er’; just as the monochromed child simplistically longs to gawp and eat ice-cream, so too do these men long for a cultivated goddess, albeit a goddess reduced to the agricultural, rather than an exotic hot-house variety. The ‘goddess farm’ may well be Mendelssohn’s bid to resolve the mother/whore dichotomy that surfaces intimately and insistently at the poem’s end. Along the way, she deploys Victorian tropes of femininity and masculinity, nature versus nurture. If books can be leaved fascicles and women flowers, then children, too, might be texts ephemeral, fragrant, tantalisingly legible and illegible in turn, unpredictable obligations saddled with adults’ distracting purchases and gendered expectations. Mendelssohn’s stinging satire of middle-class domesticity affirms, denies, and resists any flower-woman’s need for male protection or completion, whilst seeking an even-handed page, leaves marked by diverse pronouns.

Against this historicised floral backdrop, I turn now to Mendelssohn's tulips, beginning with her use of the tulip as a metaphor for the transcendently absent presence. Within a coverless notebook that contains dates from January and February 1974, Mendelssohn writes:

drawn into acknowledgement
 regret
 human power
 prowess
 ship of tresses.
 not one allows
 its own movement
 parting rivers
 Wild tulips
 become dream

the Same.
 the One Place.
 moving

visited by
 gravitational pull
 you're here!

This passage occupies page three of what appears to be a single entry.⁵⁰ It begins: 'Cactus plants aren't everything | Remember THAT.' A surrealist paragraph follows, replete with 'Blue sparks' that 'spoke of night' and 'a man in bandbox dress' delivering ice cream cones, each cone 'bear[ing] a message for you'. As so often in Mendelssohn's notebooks, prose and poetry shade into one another, and the next page includes four structured stanzas resolutely divided by horizontal lines. Phrases speak to an overriding sense of loss: 'behind | Always.'; 'there is not much more: | Gritty.'; 'Pining | The nervous needles'. These yearning, anxious moments of reflection presage the admission and companionate sorrow that defines the opening of the passage on the next page, quoted in full above. The bids for power and valour that follow 'regret' feel causal; 'prowess' is significantly misaligned, a fortitude gone awry. Etymologically, 'prowess' is a wonderfully contrary word: via a French lineage, its suffix typically feminises, as in 'manageress' or 'lioness'. In Middle English, derived from the Latinate 'itia', 'ess' signifies nouns of quality and position: largesse, richesse. A contemporary writer who

consciously identified as a poetess and a Jewess, Mendelssohn is surely alert to these connotations. The 'ess' is semantic and homophonic, hence Mendelssohn moves fluidly in this rough scrap of verse from the manly, upright courage of 'prowess' to the clinging, feminised ornamentation of 'tresses'; from admirable, discrete acts of daring or expertise to a vehicle improbably constructed of sun rays, locks of hair, or long, leafy shoots and tendrils. A ship of tresses may beguile, but it also clings and lingers, anchored by its own design. A cumulative mass, it betokens no exception, yields no heroic Moses who can incite an enslaved population or part the clogged and obdurate waters, the Sea of Reeds. Out of this morass, 'Wild tulips | become dream'. This rebellious-cum-domestic flower is an oneiric release slightly askew on its line, a geotropic rupture of the stasis that is 'the same' and 'the One Place' where movement is downward, a brooding 'gravitational pull'. Is the speaker also a flower, roots taken, forcing herself skyward? Is Mendelssohn, held at Holloway Prison as she writes, recalling Coleridge's dictum: 'No plot so narrow, be but Nature there'? The spontaneous conclusion – 'you're here!' – furthers these Coleridgean echoes, speaking to the 'delight' that 'Comes sudden on [the] heart' when, from a place of confinement, absence is imaginatively transposed to presence.⁵¹ This presence is recognition: perhaps of another being, perhaps the 'draw[ing] into acknowledgement' of the self and the lived truth of its moment in time.

Labelled wild, Mendelssohn's 1974 tulips contrarily signal a tranquil epiphany consistent with the tradition that flowers console.⁵² Envisioned, the wildflower brings with it unrealised promise and distant possibility. A subsequent rendering of a subject longing to be at one with tulips is considerably more fraught, freighted with gendered language of aggression and victimisation. In 1980, Mendelssohn illustrates, authors, and produces a pamphlet entitled *where does peace lie?* which concludes by aligning the tulip with rages murderous and suicidal, a sadomasochism born from the unrealised desire the tulip itself represents.⁵³ The pamphlet is credited to and stars a 'Mendleson', a spelling consistent with that used by Mendelssohn's family of origin.⁵⁴ It is comprised of two sheets of A3 paper folded into triptychs: one forming an outer cover that closes over and enwraps the inner pleated sheet. Painstakingly conceived in Mendelssohn's hand and then photocopied, the pamphlet includes drawings, charcoal sketches, dramatic scenes replete with stage directions, and a concluding narrative poem (see below image). The literature within *where does peace lie?* is commensurate with much of Mendelssohn's writing in the early 1980s: whimsical, satirical, paratactic, combative, comical. Doubled figures reinforce the sense of a self at war between performance and reality, external perception and internal ideal. These conflicts are embedded in a pervasively surreal otherworldliness of new dimensions and fantasy,



Cover and one triptych panel, *where does peace lie?* (1980).

and in combination, characterisation and style will culminate in the furious failure of Mendelssohn's tulip ideal.

The first section of the inner triptych includes Mendelssohn's drawing of an enraged-looking woman with one or two profiles embedded within her torso. In the accompanying dialogue, a person identifies as Queen Juliana with a gammy leg, presumably a reference to the Queen of the Netherlands who abdicated in the year that Mendelssohn produced this work. An interlocutor tells this 'queen' that she is like Richard III, a comparison prompting an accusation of unlawfully entering the palace.

The interlocutor insists that s/he has always lived there; both agree to call 'the clerk'. In unison, they tell that individual, 'we are in dimension' and 'OLIVIA de HAVILAND'. Built round a need for recognition from authority and a challenge to the same, the scene culminates in a reference to an American silver screen star, a woman who embodies an idealised femininity only scarcely and briefly attainable. Beneath this script is a boxed-off corner re-emphasising the privileged link between legacy or long-term recognition and divine good luck: 'Q. WHY WAS SHAKESPEARE SO POMPOUS./A. BECAUSE HE CARRIED GODS ON HIS WING.' Triptych part two is similarly marked by divided selves, disruption to the establishment, and a fragmented female. It begins by juxtaposing a Swiss couture clothier with militarised language, begging those conversant with Angry Brigade activities to recall the 1 May 1971 bombing of the Biba fashion outlet on London's Kensington High Street. The denunciation embedded within these lines is consistent with Mendelssohn's retrospective antipathy for those very activities:

BALLY	NUISANCE
TERRITORIAL	ARMY

NOT EVEN INTERESTED IN THE PAST

A FIGHTER NOT TO BE RECOMMENDED OR
REDUCED AT ANY PRICE.

Another doubled figure graces this page, in this case, a male bust, possibly with medals on his chest, a second head lurking behind him like an outgrowth. A surreal hubbub of cowdust, genius, unhappy children, excrement, cream pie, and 'freaky brie' ensues; an admission is made of fearing hell. In the bottom right corner, a woman of colour insists on not having to practice, and imagines asking for the return of her corkscrew. A heavy line bifurcates her face, raising the prospect of a third doubled self; a zigzag runs down her neck, diagonal lines run behind her: she appears crossed out as she asserts herself. Like the initial anonymous female, Queen Juliana, and de Haviland before her, this woman's autonomy is fragmented, unreachable.

Throughout *where does peace lie?* Mendelssohn continually discredits her creation. One section shows a large, abstract, charcoal figure; beside it reads in large hand: 'an elaboration | of her own | fantasies' and 'Champion driver'. This oversized statement diminishes the pamphlet to an untenability, a well-manipulated vehicle. A final, signed section continues this dismissal, opening as follows: 'An old cynical and bitter interrogation. | I shouldn't take it too seriously | Gurdjieff's on the mind.' Reducing all that precedes this statement to the contested teachings of an infamous

twentieth-century mystic, Mendelssohn then imagines others wanting to banish her protagonist: 'Mendleson is the on the is the take that | woman out of here whispers the down there'. Like rumour, these two overlapping lines open themselves up to multiple, disparate phrasings. A barrage of bogland, grotesquery, prissiness, servants, bullets, disasters, candles, teeth, glamour, mountains, and marble dolphins follows, escalating the combined luxury, pathos, and violence running through the pamphlet. But Mendelssohn's distaste for capitalist inequities is often mixed with an unabashed desire for resplendent wealth, as in the closing lines here, where (at last) we arrive at our tulip:

"Skipping ropes come from bones, Peregrine," that is what I would say if I was rich. I would answer my servants very patiently, and have intelligent conversations with all of them.

Long coats horn.

"You're a schizophrenic barbarian and you need shooting," he said. And there was I getting ready to bloom into a tulip.

So I walked round the park I'd made up in my head and said to each tulip, "I wish you were dead." and said to each, "Tulip, I wish you were dead."

'I don't want to be a lady novelist | In a summer dress' Mendelssohn writes in *Implacable Art*, but she often envisions the self as a bourgeois patroness, genteelly dispensing democracy at her leisured whim.⁵⁵ With fantasy privilege comes gothic knowledge: toys and luxuriant outerwear are forged from bones and horn, or fragments of the living.⁵⁶ This Victorian drawing-room of verbal curiosities is violated by the reductive, threatening diagnosis of a male perpetrator who is a near-constant presence in Mendelssohn's writing.⁵⁷ 'Mendleson' he accuses of irrationality, lunacy; confirming the rumours, he labels her feral, rude outsider, a woman who should be cast out or purged. Who speaks? Is this Peregrine, upstart radical, prepared to decimate a member of the ruling classes? Ornithologically, peregrines embody martial prowess; as a traditional male name, Peregrine signifies a pilgrim, a traveller, a path-breaker – all viable, polyvalent ascriptions. Peregrine or no, 'he' disrupts the fluidity of 'Mendleson's' fantasy. Once his threat is uttered, she maintains access to her envisioned park, but cannot become a flower, is no Narcissus, Crocus, Orchis, or Paeon. Instead, she internalises the violence that menaces her, identifying to wreak destruction upon others, upon self as ideal, feminised floral other. The multiple dialogues of *where does peace lie?* culminate in this female speaker incanting death upon the silent tulips, among whom she aspired to take her feminine place. But the destruction does not quite come to pass; these flowers

are left intact. In its murderous conclusion, the speaker rejects both the threat of the male perpetrator and the assumption that women are natural nurturers attuned to the language of flowers. Ultimately, however, her fury is directed not at feminine ideals, but at the disruption that ensues when attempts are made to realise them in a world where all things labelled female are so readily and persistently maligned. Unmitigatedly violent, the conclusion of *where does peace lie?* paradoxically assaults fragile feminine blossoms in a preservationist fantasy of an as-yet-unrealised femininity, one signalled by the splintered, anachronous females that populate this short text, all expressly countering and complicating the triumphant ‘you’re here!’ of Mendelssohn’s transcendent wild tulips of 1974.

At least five years later, Mendelssohn renounces the incantation of *where does peace lie?*, reinventing the female author as ‘the beautiful red tulip lady’. Lacking title or date, there are two variants of this poem, one of which is dedicated to Mendelssohn’s third child, Emerald, born in 1985.⁵⁸ According to *The Language of Flowers* (1902), red tulips are a ‘declaration of love’, and that is what these poems seek to be: unlike the destructive impulses at work in *where does peace lie?* these two manuscripts insist upon the divine ordinariness of the tulip.⁵⁹ Humbly unmonumental, this flower is a delicate, well-formed being bathed in purist water, air, and feeling:

a tulip generates no fear
 although it may not build a kingdom
 and neither is it set
 in plaster for the mayhem
 of tears that water despises
 bathing without salty teardrops
 that would choke a delicate red lady’s
 satin cool eyes of perfect pointed tips
 A background of love and lovely clear air
 repels any fear of unwanted intruders
 to the nature we share in this awkward music
 that waits for no cold inhuman resort
 where young boys from southern paintings
 have been changed into eels electrically fainting
 and gigantic black snakes knock down
 skyscraping ladders in the games that are played
 that make up that we are adders who can only be
 taken away from the beautiful red tulip lady

whom by the moon's tuneful cusp
 in the clear lovely background of love
 we are gazing at her poem this evening.

For most of this poem, Mendelssohn's motifs are discernibly Victorian, at one with nineteenth-century floral poems. The work finds ready comparison with Carrie R. Bronson's 'Marguerite' of 1886, where a young girl spends 'a golden afternoon' with her beautiful, dainty 'little sisters' and playmates the daisies, 'dream[ing] and wander[ing] in the sunshine'.⁶⁰ These flowers, too, author stories: 'Pretty things they tell me, all the meadow secrets'. In a second, shorter draft of 'a tulip generates no fear', Mendelssohn deals still more forthrightly in an outdated moralism: here, the 'delicate red lady's | satin cool eyes of perfect pointed tips' are suspect: 'a delicate red lady's | "sinn" of perfect pointed tips'. Customarily 'sinne' or 'synne', this spelling begins in the tenth century and fades into obsolescence by the seventeenth. The draft concludes in this archaic mode: 'on folding green's hither side a night time's ride | away from moon's tuneful cusp | the tulip in an emerald lake resides a stately brave flower'. Medieval in its colouring, a red love endures in a lake of green. The conflicted result is an impassioned expression of affection for daughter Emerald, even as overbearing diction and antiquated register conspire to keep strong feeling at bay.⁶¹ The relationship between distance and sentiment remains crucial to the poem, but in the longer version, these forcefully dignified lines are displaced by the prospect of lurking enemies.

Love and 'clear air' 'repel[l]' the intruder that insinuates, threatening the harmonious 'nature we share'. Environment, genetics, and personality are all at stake in this latter phrase. '[R]epel[l]' may deliberately invoke the fourteenth- to seventeenth-century spelling of 'repeal', a word that variously referred to the recall of a person from exile, the abrogation of a law or sentence, and a release; 'repel[l]' liberates and, perhaps less freely, returns to origins. Where in Bronson's 'Marguerite' the most sinister allusions are to the sun chasing shadows, in Mendelssohn's 'a tulip generates no fear', flower play is figured as Eden overtaken by the ancient game of snakes and ladders, or vices and virtues. Within eight or nine lines, Mendelssohn's surrealist imagery reconstructs the outsidership, intrusion, violence, complicity, and loss that we saw throughout *where does peace lie?*. Tulips are sanctuary from this overblown Eden, yet the riotous, hyperbolic creeping and climbing of eels, oversized snakes, and adders is a nightmare vision difficult to set aside. Artifice is everywhere on show: who are those 'young boys from southern paintings'? Peder Severin Krøyer's *Summer Day on Skagen's Southern Beach* (1884), where eleven naked youths submerge themselves, as a twelfth figure – a fully-clad girl – stands downcast, looking on? John

Singer Sargent's *Two Boys on a Beach, Naples* (1878)? David Hockney's Californian *Peter Getting out of Nick's Pool* (1966), the water awash in reflected white stripes, serpentine electrical and undulating pink? Against the 'making up' of the anarchic game, the motion is downward: swooning, cascading ladders, the fall of humanity into which 'we' are co-opted because mislabelled adders. At the apex of this exposed fiction appears the mythology of distance, the untruth that we are at one remove from 'the beautiful red tulip lady'. The background of love prevails as we are asked to gaze at her poem in the safety of this knowledge: she is aesthetically pleasing and ever-present, and we can immerse ourselves in her perfection without any choking on 'salty teardrops'. But this pat conclusion dissatisfies, is too akin to Margeurite's final riposte to the charge that daisies are fickle companions: 'From their dainty snow-beds | I can hear their voices in winter just the same, | In my dreams I wander with my meadow-sisters, | Ah, 'tis well they called me by the daisy's name'. Summer proximity appeases winter's distanced sentiment in Bronson's poem, but the red tulip lady maintains a deific distance in the longer version of 'a tulip generates no fear'. This demand for aloofness and the rewards of sentimentality's proximity, even its saccharine stickiness, is untenable. The overriding fantasy is mawkish, the nightmare overwrought, and these extremes fail at the complexities of feeling, intellection, or circumstance.

'[A] tulip generates no fear' founders, but its preoccupations are spectacularly recalibrated in Mendelssohn's 'Silk & Wild Tulips'.⁶² In a manuscript variant of 'Silk & Wild Tulips', a poem first published in 1995, Mendelssohn answers its central question -- 'o what is love?' -- as follows: 'to be closed in upon from a great distance'.⁶³ In the finished poem, this answer becomes 'the tip of a tongue, a silk white dove'. The tongue's tip is unsentimentally intimate; the dove (no peregrines here) is the only overt claim to the titular silk, encouraging peace to preside over the poem. Love is thus delicately poised between bodily proximity and celestial remoteness. Stanza one reads:

Afraid of my father's power the object speaks country does it concur
 Entering this petrification, perforce the accident is indicative it is
 A report, repeated pondering fall, a petition, a portrait I would not bear
 A portrait of throated wires through blood
 It is demanded of me that I die having neglected my duty.

Dread is expressly linked to patriarchy, which is perhaps why, in the past, the feminised 'tulip generate[d] no fear' and was not a kingmaker. By extension, the speaking object becomes the voice of the marginalised, parroting a questionable nationalism. Where 'the beautiful red tulip lady' was not 'set | in plaster', this figure recognises that

petrification paralyses and besets. Gravity continues to do the forceful work it has done since Mendelssohn's first known poetic mention of wild tulips in 1974. But in lieu of past anti-Edenic cascading eels and (l)adders, in 1995, Mendelssohn places the culpable self at the centre of the lapsarian: this fall is considered, and is accompanied by supplication, is again, as it was in 1974, 'drawn into acknowledgement | regret'. Similarly, the perplexing 'young boys from southern paintings' are replaced by an agonised self-portrait, one where 'the nature we share' is a phenomenal combination of artifice and biology: 'A portrait of throated wires through blood'. Circulation is technological, not organic, a replica of functioning being. This 'I' is a personal, deeply flawed martyr, forced into a painfully self-conscious irresponsibility. Sacrificial language sounds its lamentable note through the poem that follows, so that love, too, 'will not fight and is crushed by speculation, a sinful breast | Cleansed'. Where the 'delicate red [tulip] lady's | sinn' is as archly delineated as her perfection, here sin is owned, repented, and reignited by 'Provokation'. Once an infectious, external threat, provocation now becomes part of an eminently human cycle, a 'dead weight' that recurs alongside oppressions that this speaker angrily resists. And, 'char[ring] the air with shot speech', oppressive wars are everywhere underway: of gender, of class, of artist versus non-artist. Neither barbarian nor tulip lady, this speaker is a poet outsider, beyond 'noble patriotic inclination', one among a number of theorists of war and peace whose '[t]heses are buried or placed on parole'. By stanza four, this 'we' encompasses a group held in thrall to a self-exalting 'petty dictatorship', ultimately reduced to membership in a 'sky scumbled blue quaternity', another haunting portrait, faint and faintly ironized (all too readily, all too reductively, Angry Brigade scapegoats Barker, Greenfield, Creek, and Mendleson spring to mind as its subjects).

After its title, the poem mentions no tulips. The flowers that are referenced in 'Silk & Wild Tulips' are a disorienting bouquet of intoxicants, purgatives, and romance, all associated with writing. There is a lotus, circled as time passes, marked by habit and loss. Homer's flower signalling dreamy forgetfulness of origins, this lotus 'catches the tip of the dragonfly's wing' rather than the end of love's tongue, and this interaction produces a means of communication too overheated to decipher, 'an exhaust pipe carved in braille'. Along with the lotus, there is a plant often mistaken for a cactus, euphorbia:

We are old with the sound of horsehair, 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 despite euphorbia

A genus existing variously and globally, euphorbia is known for its toxic sap and unusual flowers. Mendelssohn's euphorbia is intended to save or detain the poet, is cleanse or void, a possibly necessary poison. The poem concludes via roses:

Open'd by background loss, closed by measured step,
 Around the fountain the old men slept, the women deep in the heart of roses rouges foncés,
 And the chimney sweeps wept until they discerned that their tears had created ink
 To tell of squares of blue & finely pointed moons, silhouetted cats' upturned tails
 Catching at the lunatics they promised the coals would glow
 Memories of tail coats arranged around angel pie & a tankard of stiff pheasant feathers.

This turn conjures Blake's chimney sweeps and sweeping lines.⁶⁴ It is also Dickensian, evoking a nineteenth-century novelistic urbanity locatable within 'the covers of contentment' delineated in the previous lines, a contentment that Mendelssohn suggests will not assuage felt need. Along the way, we 'progress through a sequence of tranquil passages' that Mendelssohn's speaker neither trusts nor dismisses; instead, she reminds us, as she will again in *Implacable Art*, that art does not follow the rules, that 'a poem is not going to give precise directions'.⁶⁵ The distinction made here is between popular and high art, one of Mendelssohn's chief preoccupations. Despite her aversion to summative, predictable narrative, the sentimental band of outcasts is given the final say: homeless men sleep soundly; starving young artists impart their vision to their uninterested, mentally unhinged audience. Contra Shelley, these artists believe that the coal of their creating minds will glow, not fade. And the women are the flowers of their age, inextricably embedded in 'roses rouges foncés', satirically ornamented with continental cachet. The final line extends the women's luxuriant floral arrangement: tailcoats encircle a white meringue, petals to its inner whorl, and the tankard of stiff pheasant feathers has bud-like connotations. But the limitations of this rag-tag human bouquet are indicated by the line that prefaces this scene. Where, in the 1980s, 'a tulip generates no fear' and possesses 'a background of love' elevated to a 'clear lovely background of love' by the end of the poem, the final scene of 'Silk & Wild Tulips' is '[o]pen'd by background loss', a misfortune shared by succour-seeking reader and speaker alike. A poem beset by divisiveness concludes with a self-conscious, critical romanticism, facilitating a 'measured step' that replaces the cloying or extreme scales of Mendelssohn's previous floral writings. Along the way, the poem is bestrewn by an unlikely host of flowers that signal the impossibility of communication. Impossible because innately ineffective; impossible when all-too-effective. These flowers announce an absent

linguistic ideal as presently absent as the tulips that govern the poem, as presently absent as the fantasised tulips and riven female figures of Mendelssohn's prison diary and *where does peace lie?* pamphlet, as silently pervasive as the domesticity the cultivated tulip denotes.⁶⁶ As in 1974, wild tulips become, and remain, dream; their pairing with the equally visionary silk white dove of peace is no accident. Afraid of paternal power, this feminised, petrified object speaks before it is spoken to, 'speaks country' even as it exists 'in the wrong country at the wrong time'. Asynchronous potential, the silenced tulip recognises its own sublimity, a sublimity echoed by the incomparable poem written under its name. Cultivated from a scrawl in a prison-issue notebook to aggressive incantation to overblown poem, in its final guise, 'Silk & Wild Tulips' is perfectly poised between vulnerable self-reflexivity and the magisterial.

Introduced to Europe via Turkey in the sixteenth century, tulips were admired for their unusually intense colour and became coveted as an overpriced luxury item, catalysing the infamous 'Tulip Mania' of the Dutch Golden Age, as well as the metonymic use of 'tulip' for a showy or admirable person. Wild tulips differ from domestic in that their petals are open, sharply pointed, variegated; they are more overblown star than perfectly rendered cup. Connoting untamed autonomy, the phrase 'wild tulip' semantically refutes this flower's history of commercial valuation, its groomed predictability. Where 'tulip' suggests arrogance, wildflowers denote egalitarianism, freedom.⁶⁷ Mendelssohn is keen to privilege uncultivated flora: her wild cornflower of 1997 finds companions throughout her *oeuvre* in 'wild long-stemmed | daisies'; the 'Tansy' of 'Tansy Tchaikovsky'; 'wild cherry'; a 'rose that is drenched sweet & wild as pink | geranium'; serpolet or wild thyme; and the 'fading' yarrow of yet another female floral speaker, in this instance, ageing – 'polling | oestrogen' – and contemplating 'rural retirement units'.⁶⁸ And, of course, the wild pansy. Traditionally associated with compassion and grief, the *viola tricolor* or wild pansy acquired its name from a bastardised French: '*pensez-a-moi*', think of me.⁶⁹ For Mendelssohn, the title refers to two women of literature, *Viola* of *Twelfth Night* and the stepmother of Theodor Storm's '*Viola Tricolor*' (1873), both lost figures muted by circumstance, but who, like silent flowers, persist in communicating.⁷⁰

In the titular, opening poem of her 1993 pamphlet, *viola tricolor*, a paternalistic, aggressive language is imposed upon an innocent pansy:

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.

Perceived as righteous to a fault, the flower girl poet is disrupted: snatched from a female mentor or authority figure, delivered to outlaws espousing a self-aggrandizing revolutionary purity. As in *where does peace lie?*, a female protagonist could blossom, but is co-opted by others' agendas. Gender stereotype is avidly performed and confirmed throughout this poem: the possibly maternal figure is 'trained'; poetry belongs to men only, so that the girl-poet's writing becomes '*implanted* with a tightrope voice', teetering vertiginously over its own realisation, between orderly females and 'wide lined prostitution' – another nod to the mother/whore dichotomy. '[A] girl | can never be a boy in artificial reality' Mendelssohn opines, emphasising her speaker's hopeless bid for access to the male subject position, the female desire to be recognised as more than artifice mimicking reality. The poem concludes with a reverie upon custard 'ladled out [...] by pasty girls in white starched caps'. Abjectly served by an army of women sporting the stiff headgear of nurse or factory worker, a uniform that evolved from the modest head covering prescribed to nuns, this glutinous pudding recurs in the speaker's dreamworld. Surgent, volcanic, bursting through a veil of 'green foliage', barely contained within a white wooden frame, the fantasy custard becomes art, a portrait comprised of 'delicious paint' that 'sinks and sings with natural ecstasy'. Articulating female labours poetic and domestic, 'viola tricolor' elevates female production, staging the fruit of women's quotidian labours through a curtain of green fronds, insisting on its artistry. Confined to the prospective, oneiric temporality of the poem, this aesthetic sublimity is nonetheless expressed. The speaker is decimated, her life rerouted, by charges of a purity that does not reside in constrained domestic insularity where 'no books [are] allowed at table[s]' overseen by obedient, pale women. Instead, a prospective purity lies within the truths told and dreamt by the demoralised wild pansy speaker, her reveries upon artworks that combine the quotidian with the transcendent.

For Mendelssohn, flowers should be understood as inviolate, and in turn, the unheard language of girls and women may well have an inculpable strain, offering the hope of words uncontaminated by the taint of aggression, each one a peaceful silk white dove. This vision is as impossible as it is consoling: a secondary name for *viola tricolor* is 'heartsease', a term that will recur in Mendelssohn's archive and

appear in *viola tricolor*, where a poem conflates heartsease with the reluctant language of victims or ‘fully fledged truthsayers’.⁷¹ Wildflowers, wild floral women speak Mendelssohn’s unattainable, are riposte to the supposed purities and possibilities of the revolutionary politics razed in ‘*viola tricolor*’. In a late 1970s typescript extract from her draft, episodic *roman-à-clef*, Mendelssohn writes about her youthful activism, wondering retrospectively about her absolute belief that happiness would follow with changes in ‘economic social and material conditions’.⁷² On reflection, one of her happiest experiences in this tumultuous period was time spent in the Welsh countryside undertaking ordinary daily chores and listening to ‘the silence of the hills and the trees and the flowers, quietly getting on with blooming without asking themselves if that’s OK or not by anyone else, let alone the State’. She then asserts:

And now that I’m not a revolutionary, that I’m not trying to change the world, that I’m not trying to stop the ugliness so that I don’t have to feel my pain—I’m overcome by wave upon wave of it. Finally I belong. The pain is me, I am pain. And I am the flower and the hills and the trees, the laughter and the song...

Wild flowers are the fragile, wounded, natural female subject; wild flowers are silent, communicative answers. In another undated prose extract, Mendelssohn writes: ‘I can only ask questions because they don’t know anything positive and factual except for a few battles, ministers – the odd flower, a quote or two I DO understand’.⁷³ Blossoms and language can be intrinsically understood, recorded, returned to over the decades. For Mendelssohn, ideal language is Dickinson’s ‘Blossom of the Brain’: endlessly fructifying, ‘[i]ts processes unknown’, its flourishing encouraged ‘by Design or Happening’, or more accurately, by happening laboured over by design.⁷⁴

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Mendelssohn’s embrace of unstained and unsustainable perfectabilities exacerbates her critical vertigo, her outrage over failed ideals aesthetic, political, personal. The persistence and degree of this fury can alienate her reader. But beneath this idealism is a ferocious work ethic coupled with a unique leftism. In 1993, whilst finalising *viola tricolor* and working on another collection, *Spinster of Arts*, Mendelssohn applied for a music theatre residency at Wingfield College, Suffolk. In her application, she describes *Spinster of Arts* as a work that

follows & develops the tradition of unresolved poetic debate initiated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I should tentatively describe its more involuted passages as that

form of ‘modernism’ (a genre I still find difficult to resolve) which does not agree, always, with itself, yet works to break through to new form [....]

In short it embraces the spectrum from prescribed labour to creative work; and I have been bringing through the John Stuart Mill/Jeremy Bentham/Virginia Woolf & Bloomsbury dialectic between utilitarian thought and a democratic aesthetic.⁷⁵

Mendelssohn recognises the nineteenth-century influence on a cautiously delineated modernism (and who could resolve modernism as a genre?), and on her own thinking. Through ‘prescribed labour’ she seeks to achieve a democratic aesthetic, the purview of a contemporary, politicised frame of mind. This will to democracy is writ large in Mendelssohn’s turn and return to wildflowers, in the years she spends breaking the ground for her tulips alone.

Mendelssohn’s affinity for beautiful red tulip ladies never fully subsides, but a democratic urge is also evident in her identification with the humble potato that appears in an addendum to ‘Silk & Wild Tulips’ that is included in some publications of the poem.⁷⁶ The addendum opens by reasserting the association between flowers and impossible communication: ‘by gardenias I cannot telephone’ and describes a speaker exiled within a plot of this heavily-scented flower. A racist menaces her and ‘cuts wires’, recalling the portrait of ‘throated wires through blood’ that occurs earlier in the poem, exacerbating the paucity of contact. The speaker is still a martyr, forced ‘into shivering apologies for absence’. But nor does she want ‘to leave these gardenia clouds | that become blue for my chalk face’. These lines link flowers, art, and the speaker, as throughout ‘Silk & Wild Tulips’, blue is the colour of creativity, be it scumbled, drawn in squares, or the ‘magnesium blue’ that the speaker seeks from her muse.⁷⁷ The speaker fears leaving her gardenia bower, having to encounter ‘a pink too true to be lilac’ and stems too frightening to belong to reassuring tulips. These unfamiliar flowers block communication, and in like spirit, the poem ends by jaundicing the silk white dove of peace: ‘yellow silk your heart darkens’. But in the middle of the poem, the floral imagery is abruptly disrupted: ‘a clever poetess would flee i am a potato | my clothes are made of potatoes’. This same dichotomy between life-giving flower and stultifying vegetable mass recurs in the poems Mendelssohn wrote at Hinton Grange Care Home just before she died.⁷⁸ Written in a devastatingly shaky but determined hand, these poems are at times illegible. In one instance, the exalted ‘poetess’ is countered by an imposter potato:

she was a poetess
 I pretended that I was a potato
 Our farm had been taken away
 tucked our fields under the arms

of the poor artists
 drawings of charcoal
 and ink
 went on to compose Quartets
 named
 swallows.

Though a competent actor, this speaker-potato is mere sustenance for other adulated artists, or may be fodder for another divided self. In another poem from this same collection, Mendelssohn writes: 'i only | Want to check meanings | and Forget every word', adding: '(my name) | (a potato) | (an hot potato)'. If flowers are idealised wordless communicators, Mendelssohn expresses a like desire for meaning without language. Language harms, and Mendelssohn's very name – vilified by the press during her 1972 trial and 1976 prison release, and continually redivided by her through her life – resists a firm hold. But as in 'Silk & Wild Tulips', these despairing identifications are countered by her unstoppable glorification of flora:

and the grasses
 the fields
 the life.
 the birdies singing,
 the birdies' song,
 in the trees
 in the fields,
 in the flowers,
 the life

On the same page, well beneath affirming flowers, Mendelssohn writes: 'sand soft'. Once again, 'Wild tulips | become dream', resisting 'gravitational pull', or in this instance, provide soft landing for the same.

Acknowledgements

Images reprinted with kind permission of the Mendelssohn estate.

In the endnotes, all references beginning 'SxMs109' refer to call numbers from the Anna Mendelssohn Archive held at Special Collections, University of Sussex.

Notes

- ¹ Grace Lake, 'UNFINISHED' in *Celestial Empire* (Unpublished manuscript: SxMs109/5/A/3, 1983).
- ² Grace Lake, 'Untitled' in *constant red/mingled damask*, 2 (1987), p. 49.
- ³ Grace Lake, 'Tansy Tchaikovsky' in *The News*, 1 (1987), unpaginated.
- ⁴ Grace Lake, 'ELEVEN' in *Propaganda Multi-Billion Bun* (Self-published typescript: SxMs109/5/A/7/3, 1985), pp. 6 (i–iii).
- ⁵ The group included Peter Riley, Lynne Harries, Nigel Wheale, Kate Wheale, and Martin Thom.
- ⁶ 'studio VII' in *involution*, 5 (1997), pp. 45–47.
- ⁷ See Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 165.
- ⁸ The first quotation in this sentence is Suzanne Clark's (*Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991], p. 7). Clark points to the source of the second: T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (*Collected Poems: 1909–1962* [London: Faber and Faber, 1963], p. 14). 'Would it all have been worthwhile, Eliot's comically morose speaker goes on to contemplate, 'If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl . . . should say: | "That is not it at all"' (17). The absent beloved – idealised and loathed – is continually charged with providing haptic, domestic reassurance against the sparsening of Prufrock's life.
- ⁹ 'Where are our wo's in their pinnies?' writes Mendelssohn in her 1985 MAMA manifesto, her shorthand for woman homophonically conflating females with misery. Entitled 'womanifiasco numera una', this tract speaks on behalf of women who buck sentimental conventions, namely single mothers and 'revolutionary linguistic radical women poets' (SxMs109/B/2/80). The clothing references are drawn from a 1986 Mendelssohn typescript poem titled 'In the end tulane –' (SxMs109/5/A/26).
- ¹⁰ Poem beginning 'i can hardly bear going down town to see those people' in *Propaganda Multi-Billion Bun*. (Self-published typescript: SxMs109/5/A/7/3, 1985), pp. 5–6.
- ¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), pp. 1–42, p. 15.
- ¹² Beverly Seaton, *Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 17.
- ¹³ Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820–1885* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 132.
- ¹⁴ Entitled 'UNFINISHED', the 'lady bower' poem offers an Eden in demise; its conclusionary flowers are 'frayed', 'pecked', and 'poison'. Lines two and three are the first epigraph of this essay (see endnote one). The second part of this sentence refers to an untitled poem at the outset of *Parasol*

One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue. (Cambridge: Involution, 1996), where a 'Viola' speaks to the Bernache of Mendelssohn's *Bernache Nonnette* (1995).

- ¹⁵ Mendelssohn's notes reference Barrett Browning's 'The Dead Pan' (SxMs109/5/A/15/1). Mendelssohn's botanical notes on wild pansies include: 'Leaves very variable, invest ovate, obtuse, becoming slowly or rapidly narrower upwards' and 'stipules variable but often palmately lobed, mid-lobe usually lanceolate and entire, not leaf-like' (SxMs109/5/A/15/2).
- ¹⁶ Stein writes: 'No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept.' ('Composition as Explanation' [1926] in *The Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69481/composition-as-explanation>> [accessed 7 January 2021]).
- ¹⁷ 'A Lay of the Early Rose' in *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sally Minogue (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2015), pp. 157–163.
- ¹⁸ See endnote 16.
- ¹⁹ That the 'lay' or song of the title is attributed to the rose compounds the irony of the poem's male-dominated conclusion.
- ²⁰ An undated Mendelssohn letter to Douglas Oliver includes the lament that 'poetess' is no longer in use, and cites Barrett Browning as an influence on her use of the term (SxMs109/3/A/1/43).
- ²¹ Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 1988), p. 57.
- ²² From a Mendelssohn letter dated 27 February 1993 (SxMs109/8/C/1); this quote will be discussed in greater detail in what follows.
- ²³ My thanks to anonymous reader two for encouraging me to foreground the absent presence at the heart of Mendelssohn's flowers, an idea initially relegated to the sidelines of this essay.
- ²⁴ Petrino, p. 136.
- ²⁵ *ibid*, p. 135.
- ²⁶ Mendelssohn claims to have started writing poems as a child, but it is a refrain of her archive that she began writing a long poem about London in the late 1960s, or just as Situationism exerts an influence on the University of Essex, where Mendelssohn was a student. Complicating this ready association is another archival refrain: Mendelssohn's frequent disavowal of Situationist principles. On 'CONTINUOUS DRIFTING' see Ivan Chtcheglov's 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' (1953). For 'free creativity' as a replacement for poetry proper, see 'On the Poverty of Student Life' (1966). Both essays are in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 1–8, p. 8 and 402–429, p. 429.
- ²⁷ My editorial work on Mendelssohn's poetry collates 400 pages of published poems, for which heavily edited drafts exist in abundance. Many poems were published more than once. See *I'm Working Here: The Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn*, ed. Sara Crangle (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2020).
- ²⁸ In Joris Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* (1884), emblematic decadent protagonist Des Esseintes first gravitates toward 'artificial flowers that imitated real ones', then determines to pursue 'real flowers that mimicked artificial ones' (trans. Margaret Mauldon, Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2009, p. 73). The flowers with which he subsequently fills his hothouse bear a distinct resemblance to Mendelssohn's curious flower confections, as they appear to be made of oilcloth, 'starched calico', plaster, zinc, or 'punched metal'; or as desirably, flesh riddled by disease (73–74).

Motivated by politics more than aesthetics, Mendelssohn too foregrounds the overtaking of the natural by the artificial. Her 'sculptured linen flowers' arise in 'Who cycled in two fours?' as part of a critique of capitalist consumption; 'a great enamel flower' is from 'Where?', a poem that includes the lines 'whatever you fake | fake permanently, | hope for further definition, principles ineffective, | a painted flame'. Both poems are in Mendelssohn's unpaginated chapbook, *Is this a true parrot, a mountain, or a stooge?* (NY: Scrap Publishing, 1985; SxMs109/5/A/6/3). Red velvet and enamel roses surface also in 'digne', a poem that challenges, among other things, the presumed naturalness of the maternal role (*Implacable Art* [Cambridge: Folio, 2000], p. 54). Finally, 'Sniff the pretty petrol flowers' arises in a 1985 typescript poem beginning 'rolling, and all these words are alive and' (SxMs109/5/A/43/1). These petrol flowers are all that remain in the aftermath of environmental destruction, an environmental impulse dovetailing with some Victorian flower poetry (see endnote 36).

²⁹ My reference here is to Robert Herrick's widely anthologized 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time' (1648).

³⁰ Distinctions are made in each cultural manifestation of this trend: for instance, in Europe gardening was presented as a way of elevating the lower classes, while in the USA, gardening was perceived as a civilising mission over the untamed wilderness (Seaton, p. 6).

³¹ For a full-scale history of this genre, see *The Language of Flowers: A History*, where Seaton shows how the genre was always inconsistent, meaning flowers were never used as a straightforward shorthand for feeling. See also Gisela Hönnighausen, 'Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti' in *Victorian Poetry*, 10 (1972), pp. 1–15, pp. 9–10.

³² These examples are taken from a late variant of the genre, the anonymously published *The Language of Flowers* (London: Ernest Nister, 1902), unpaginated.

³³ Petrino, p. 130.

A typical introduction reads: 'The flower world is linked with all the finer sympathies of our nature ... a bouquet is the best ornament of girlish beauty' (Laura Valentine, *The Language and Sentiment of Flowers: Floral Records* [London: Frederick Warne & Co, 1890], unpaginated).

³⁴ Moine, pp. 52–53.

³⁵ Jane Wells Webb Loudon, *Botany for Ladies: A Popular Introduction to the Natural System of Plants According to the Classification of De Candolle*, London: John Murray, 1842, p. iv in Biodiversity Heritage Library <<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/32117#page/7/mode/1up>> [accessed 7 February 2021]. See also Moine, p. 54.

³⁶ *The Language of Flowers*, unpaginated.

³⁷ Petrino, pp. 134–135. Moine also discusses how women and mothers were perceived as exceptionally attuned to the language of flowers from about 1750 onwards, an ethos of care that fed nineteenth-century conservationist movements (63–65).

³⁸ Moine, p. 54.

- ³⁹ Petrino, pp. 134–135, 142. Mendelssohn appears do the same, as in: ‘I was thinking | you were blue | air | lipping | my daffodils’ (‘Sunday Beasts.’ [1988.] SxMs109/5/A/28).
- ⁴⁰ Moine, p. 97.
- ⁴¹ Gertrude Stein’s famous maxim ‘Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose’ is from ‘Sacred Emily’ in *Geography and Plays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), pp. 178–188, p. 187.
- ⁴² Grace Lake, ‘One on each shoulder, carouse.’ in *Is this a true parrot, a mountain, or a stooge?*, unpaginated.
- ⁴³ SxMs109/5/A/23/1.
- ⁴⁴ SxMs109/5/B/2/3.
- ⁴⁵ Poem beginning ‘i can hardly bear going down town to see those people.’
- ⁴⁶ Cautious because of the absence of punctuation, which allows us to group the words into less positive readings, including: ‘forget imaginable consolation’. This ambivalence is reinforced at the end of the poem, where the final stanza suggests that past deeds continue to haunt and blunt the nourishment of the ‘miracle flower’: ‘the rumour pries. | do i? | light fell’ (poem beginning ‘think twice’ in *Crystal Love D. N. A.* [Green Suede Blues Press, 1982], p. 14).
- ⁴⁷ Grace Lake, ‘UNCERTAIN THOUGH WITHIN THIS DEEPSET HEART’ in *Jewels of the Imagination*, ed. Mariah Hourihan (Sittingbourne, Kent: The International Library of Poetry, 1997), p. 458.
- ⁴⁸ Petrino offers an excellent reading of Dickinson’s ‘I’m the little “Heart’s Ease”!’ as a secular recasting of spiritual faith, and as reclamation of Eve and her descendants as more resolute than their male counterparts (149–50).
- ⁴⁹ Poem beginning ‘find one page evenly’ in *Figs*, 14 (1988), unpaginated.
- ⁵⁰ The notebook is numbered on alternate pages, and this quotation is taken from the verso of page eleven; the sides discussed in what follows are recto and verso of page ten. All three pages are in the same ink in a consistent hand. Identified dates in this coverless notebook include: 2 and 3 September (presumably 1973), 30 January (given twice), 1 and 7 February 1974 (SxMs109/2/A/3).
- ⁵¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison’ in *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 38–40.
- ⁵² Moine, p. 56.
- ⁵³ SxMs109/5/B/2/29.
- ⁵⁴ ‘Mendleson’ is the given spelling of Mendelssohn’s surname at birth; she continued using this spelling until she changed her name by deed poll to Sylvia Grace Louise Lake in 1983. She re-used Anne Mendleson on her passport circa 1996–97, and started publishing under ‘Mendelssohn’ in 2000. [W]here does peace lie? is signed ‘C H Anna Mendleson 1980’. The additional letters refer to Mendelssohn’s Hebrew name, which she iterates in an undated letter to Romana Huk as ‘Channa Nechama Enna Krshner Mendleson Lubovitch bas Hakolenian’ (SxMs109/3/A/1/20).
- ⁵⁵ ‘and Waterloo Westminster’ in *Implacable Art*, pp. 57–61.
- ⁵⁶ We might well expect coats torn, rather than Mendelssohn’s ‘coats horn’. The lettering is ambiguous, but the ‘h’ of horn resembles the same letter in a line that follows.

- ⁵⁷ 'FEAR up the stairs | man under my bed' writes Mendelssohn in 1985 in 'ELEVEN'; in 2009, at the end of her life, she begins a poem: 'his shadow was there | it watched me' (SxMs109/5/B/1/33a).
- ⁵⁸ 'for Emerald from Anna with love.' (SxMs109/1/E/2/2/1); for the shorter variant, see SxMs109/5/B/2/95.
- ⁵⁹ *The Language of Flowers*, unpaginated.
- ⁶⁰ Carrie W. Bronson, 'Marguerite' in *Good Housekeeping*, 3:4 (26 June 1886), p. 89. <http://reader.library.cornell.edu/docviewer/digital?id=hearth6417403_1297_005#page/5/mode/1up> [accessed 8 January 2021].
- ⁶¹ See also Mendelssohn's 'Rose-Gazing' for another fraught floral apostrophe to Emerald (*Poets on Writing*, ed. Denise Riley [London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1992], p. 50).
- ⁶² The version of 'Silk & Wild Tulips' used here is from the unpaginated *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage 1995).
- ⁶³ This undated manuscript is clearly an early working of 'Silk & Wild Tulips' (SxMs109/5/B/2/71). The first two stanzas alone show significant similarities with the finished poem:

I am afraid of my father's power
 his two faced power
 whilst women condemn my poverty
 and urge me to return to the man I am most afraid of
 this money business
 who does make a million from what I don't want
 him to speak of them in the same breath as
 emotionally unstable, dark thoughts tearing absent flesh,

what is love? o what is love?
 to be closed in upon from a great distance
 the letters shall remain closed
 how perfect I have to be no one knows
 the desert and the glass

- ⁶⁴ My thanks to Alistair Davies for this observation.
- ⁶⁵ 'to any who want poems to give them answers.' in *Implacable Art*, p. 34.
- ⁶⁶ For a more satiric example of Mendelssohn conflating flowers with idealised language, see 'Declared redundant 'in media res' as politics advise sentiment' in *Active in Airtime*, 2 (1993), p. 45.
- ⁶⁷ For nineteenth-century perceptions of wildflowers, see Moine, pp. 84–89.
- ⁶⁸ The Mendelssohn poems referenced in this sentence are 'Exposition' in Sheffield Typescript (1981), SxMs109/5/A/1; 'Tansy Tchaikovsky' in *The News*, 1 (1987), unpaginated; 'London 1971' in *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), pp. 185–186; poem beginning 'Reminiscent of a flat expanse trammelled' and 'minnie most beats up thérèse torchée' in *Implacable Art* (2000), pp. 104, 112; poem beginning 'polling' in *py. : a book of acrostics for p.e.g.* (2009), unpaginated.

⁶⁹ Moine, p. 70. Corroborating this etymology, in *The Language of Flowers*, the pansy is denoted as 'Thought'.

⁷⁰ The overriding strength of 'natural' or biological relation furthers these literary associations. Mendelssohn's epigraph for *viola tricolor* is taken from a scene in *Twelfth Night* where Viola articulates her shared paternal lineage with her brother (5.1.242). This occurs in the final act of the play, or the first in which we hear her name.

Mendelssohn identifies Theodor Storm's influence in her papers (see note dated 5 February 1999 in SxMs109/5/A/24/8). In Storm's native German, 'viola tricolor' means 'little stepmother' (Bayard Quincy Morgan, 'Introduction' in *Viola Tricolor and Curator Carsten*, trans. Bayard Quincy Morgan [London: John Calder, 1956], unpaginated). Storm's overdetermined novella duly centres on stepmother Inez, newcomer to a household formerly run by deceased mother Marie. Inhabitants include loyal servant Annie, child Agnes, and father Professor Rupert. Post-honeymoon, Inez is overshadowed by Marie's enduring influence over husband and daughter; biology appears to be destiny. Inez's tumultuous, overstated feeling is repeatedly, variously described. Like Shakespeare's Viola, Inez goes unnamed: though Aggie 'long[ed] for the love of this beautiful woman' she cannot call her 'Mother' and therefore 'lacked a form of address, which is the key to every cordial conversation' (Theodor Storm, 'Viola Tricolor' in *Viola Tricolor and Curator Carsten*, pp. 1–38, p. 10).

⁷¹ 'Heartsease' is the title of a piece of music Mendelssohn composed in the 1990s (SxMs109/5/B/3/1). In stanza three of the *viola tricolor* poem 'The End is Listless', Mendelssohn uses this term for the wild pansy, where it stands in for the language of a speaker quieted by misplaced blame and longstanding alienation (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993, unpaginated).

⁷² SxMs109/1/B/1/5.

⁷³ SxMs109/1/B/1/12.

⁷⁴ '945' in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson (New York: Back Bay Books, 1976), p. 443.

⁷⁵ The letter is dated 27 February 1993 (SxMs109/8/C/1).

⁷⁶ '[B]y gardenias I cannot telephone' appears two poems after 'Silk & Wild Tulips' in Mendelssohn's first publication of the poem in *Bernache Nonnette* ([Cambridge: Equipage, 1995], unpaginated). It follows immediately after 'Silk & Wild Tulips' in *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* ([London: Reality Street Editions, 2006], pp. 200–202), but is not included alongside the poem in *A State of Independence* (ed. Tony Frazer [Exeter: Stride, 1998, pp. 112–114).

⁷⁷ In a set of proofs for 'Silk & Wild Tulips', Mendelssohn adds a footnote reading: 'myzi is a muse.' (SxMs109/5/A/17/5).

⁷⁸ SxMs109/5/B/1/33a.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

