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**How to Cite:** Luna, J. 2019. Poetry's Law. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 11(1): 16, pp. 1–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.746>

**Published:** 12 August 2019

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ARTICLE

## Poetry's Law

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This essay tries to interpret Anna Mendelssohn's poetry by thinking about the ways in which her poetry consistently returns to the matter of her survival. It closely reads Mendelssohn's correspondence with Douglas Oliver and her poetry of the late 1990s, first by identifying the role played by the enemies of poetry in that writing, and second by attempting to account for this role in terms of both Anna Mendelssohn's life as a poet, and the formal political responsibilities and necessities by which the poetry is animated. The essay locates a formal precedent that illuminates both of these roles in traditional Jewish lamentation, and Mendelssohn's work is identified with this tradition in order to unpack the complexity of her embattled lyric oeuvre. The essay further suggests that Mendelssohn's insistent anti-political stance throughout her writing life entails a politics of communitarian solidarity to be found only within the remit of poetic writing. The name for this radically negative aesthetic foundation is the title of the essay.

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**Keywords:** Anna Mendelssohn; Douglas Oliver; Lament; Lamentation; Poetry; Murder

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'She weeps, yea, she weeps in the night, and her tears are on her cheek; she has no comforter among all her lovers; all her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.'

– Lamentations 1:2

'We all expect a gentle answer, Jew!'

– *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1)

Anna Mendelssohn's poetry is full of the enemies of poetry.<sup>1</sup> These enemies are ever present and diverse, always unnamed though otherwise identified by deed, vocation, or political persuasion. They threaten, shove, cajole, interrogate, and slander the poet

at almost every moment and in almost every facet of her life and practice, and they analyse, interpret, and codify her practice of living to its wished-for death. They are the would-be morticians of the imagination, their guises as various as their toxicity is lethal: liars, thieves, bad readers, cops, kidnappers, rapacious and insincere writers, conformists, social workers, academics, women who attack women, and Marxist men, to name only a fraction of those who appear in Mendelssohn's *Implacable Art* (2000) and its extraordinary earlier overture '1:3ng' (1997); they cannot as such under any sober analysis be contained under the umbrella of state power, though their function in Mendelssohn's work is often to exercise forms of violence that have historically emerged within and alongside the legislative and social conditions of contemporary statehood. If one sought to distribute them according to these conditions, they might emerge as the agents of the oppression of women and migrants, and the representatives of the institutional networks of education and incarceration that ensure the continued impoverishment of bodies and minds under late capitalism. But such a clinical identification already risks denuding the enemies of poetry in Mendelssohn's work of their singular antithetical bent. What these enemies have in common is nothing so positively identifiable as a class or gender, but rather an absolutely malicious and destructive intention towards their hated objects – poetry and art, as well as the women's minds which produce them – with which the lyric voice in Mendelssohn's work steadfastly identifies and with which it maintains a pressurized and testimonial solidarity.<sup>2</sup> The enemies of poetry are her enemies, and her enemies are the enemies of poetry. To read Mendelssohn's poetry and correspondence is to read a harrowing litany of misogynistic abuse, personal libel, and anti-Semitism, all associated in some way with contemptuous disregard for the labour of the creative artist; it is, in other words, to experience the poetic subject in overwhelming cognizance of those who would obliterate her, and indeed those who, as I will try to explain, have already obliterated her. For Mendelssohn, 'trying to work out/how I was murdered' entails both distinguishing her enemies from each other, and collapsing them into a representation of their most murderous intent, those whom she calls, in one letter to Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley, 'people who were anathema

to poetry.<sup>13</sup> No discernible moral or political principle makes the distinction in Mendelssohn's work between poetry and its enemies shine in the hallowed logic of philosophical argument or debate, because the poetry will not brook the critical discernment that would apportion blame or justification with the steady hand of historical or sociological judgement. Mendelssohn's work is simply not interested in such a schema. Neither is the work animated by any critical spirit that seeks to enlist poetry in the service of an accounting of social ills or suffering, however radical. It is, in any case, deeply suspicious of any politics that calls itself 'revolutionary,' and just as often violently repulsed by the claims of any and all politics on the subject of art. When they appear in the work, these claims are condemned as at best misguided, at worst practically vampiric; '1:3ng' states plainly that 'Politicized mediators used // To destroy me [...] Wanted art cleanly dead,' whilst *Implacable Art* bitterly contends that 'no-one stands by the laws of diplomacy that have always distinguished between culture and politics.'<sup>14</sup> In many ways the voluminous extent of Mendelssohn's oeuvre, which is just now beginning to be mapped, is the intensely private record of an intensely private suffering. But this is not to say that Mendelssohn's poems remove themselves from the world, or merely pine in pity at its loss. What animates the work instead, and what this essay is an attempt to understand and to trace through the poems in *Implacable Art* and in the poem '1:3ng,' is something else, something we might call poetry's law – something we might begin to identify as the demarcation of lines of defence and survival, and which organizes under duress the interminable labour of making habitable from the imaginative resources of poetic art that which constantly threatens to collapse and become unendurable: the life in which poetry is possible.

As the above quoted line from *Implacable Art* suggests, poetry's law on Mendelssohn's terms actively invites reaction and conservatism. 'Poetry' and 'art' retain throughout Mendelssohn's published and unpublished writing a practically Platonic value: poetry 'was the sworn oath between/my soul and the mind,' poems 'address a different world/where trees are decorated with diamonds.'<sup>15</sup> But this value, I want to suggest, is a negative one: it flares up in the visceral extremity of the poet's

attempts to defend and conserve by counter-attack the very fibres of her being against the ravages of the enemies of poetry, those who '[want] art cleanly dead.' The bejewelled pastoral of Mendelssohn's 'different world' exists in her poetry only as the pained and gaudy reflection of the most immediately distressing realities of the environment of its making, one in which Mendelssohn claims, over and over again in many different ways, 'I am not allowed to live.'<sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn's vision of a purely anti-instrumental aesthetic is central to the work, the implication being that if it was not fortified against the onslaughts of its enemies, then everything is finally lost. Mounting these barricades enables the poet to survive within the remit of poetry's law, and survive to lament what she has lost, because art in lament over its losses negates the negation of the poet: against all the odds some version of Anna Mendelssohn *has* survived, and despite not being 'allowed' to live, she does, in fact, continue to do so. It really is a matter of life and death, and reading Mendelssohn's poetry means taking seriously these kinds of stakes. It also means considering seriously, as a structural principle and emotional core of the work, what often amount to absurd cavalcades of the enemies of poetry, from feminist publishers who resemble Nazis to Marxists on bicycles, any of whom may at any point raise their fists against the lyric subject to intend her destruction.<sup>7</sup> It will not do to call this paranoia, as if we could in any case offer up some appropriate ratio of suffering with which to qualify Mendelssohn's rogues gallery of oppressors and abusers, to decide in the serenity of critical reflection which of them 'really' pose a threat. But it must be possible to consider disproportion itself as a fundamental characteristic of poetry's law of survival – as a way in which the world is made habitable – and to consider how the subject of Mendelssohn's work survives in despair to lament the destructive ambitions on her life and the life of poetry. The contentions that animate this essay are the following. Poetry's law in Mendelssohn's work is most powerfully felt in lament over the murdered subject of poetry, of the poet, of her work, and by extension of art and artistry. Throughout this essay, I read Anna Mendelssohn the poet and her lyric subject as one, that is, I read her 'I' as the expression of Mendelssohn's life as a writer. This subject survives the eradication of her life to lament its destruction, in the only place such a paradoxical experience is possible: the besieged autonomy

that poetry provides. Lament, in turn, I propose to interpret in the Hebrew tradition of *kinah* [lament], drawing on recent scholarship on the genre to do so. The importance of Mendelssohn's own Jewish heritage should not be underestimated here, and I will refer to it in what follows, though I do not claim that Mendelssohn organized or composed her writing under the nominal guise of *kinah*; rather, I want to argue that the formal complexities of the genre offer a particularly productive way to interpret Mendelssohn's work, and within it the sense of persecutory interpellation from which poetry's law offers sanctuary.<sup>8</sup> As the subject of her own lamentation, Mendelssohn is the figure upon which the enemies of poetry, of women, and of the Jewish diaspora, converge, and in doing so intermingle to the point of indiscernibility. Art is necessarily 'implacable' for Mendelssohn, I want to suggest, because it will not, and must not (at least in her hands), concede, console, or be consoled. Its subject's grief in mourning over her suffering at the hands of 'people who were anathema to poetry' is absolute, and excessive by any standard of normative commemoration. As one scholar suggests of *kinah*, Mendelssohn's implacable lament serves to '*name the singular trauma*: not to talk it away in a therapeutic manner, nor to explain it away in a theodicy of general concepts, but to name it and safeguard its original uniqueness,' and furthermore to suspend any reparative reconciliation that would erase and de-legitimise the subject of that trauma, both historically and personally.<sup>9</sup> I speculate in closing on the political implications to be drawn from this aspect of Mendelssohn's work.

Among the correspondence between Anna Mendelssohn and Douglas Oliver concerning the publication of Mendelssohn's poem '1:3ng' in the first issue of Oliver and Alice Notley's magazine *Gare du Nord* appears the following letter, quoted here in its entirety.

Dear Doug,

I don't want this turning poems into political acts. There is a gross injustice which has been perpetrated against me – it stems from Antipathy to Poetry, as well as the numerous warring parties in Poetry, I resist Wars, I resist participating in them. There is one going on at this moment right outside my

doors, someone is attacking the garden with an electric saw blade. I have to mail this off to you – and in amongst the satin rose petals being sewn for the grand ballet at the Garnier are seventeen pages or so of a reply to your query – full query. After the ruin they may be discovered with their full complement of modulations intact. Do you know of Any way that I could work Inside the old Opera in Paris? (not the new one). Do you know of Anyone who could rescue me & throw me Into the creation of the beautiful side of life because I'm good where there's theatre, music & light or is it all bureaucratic Now – should I go back to St. Petersburg or Budapest or Warsaw or Prague – or Siberia? I don't Like the Hatred of Jealousy & Frustration when it is Raw and untransposed. or Silesia? or Galicia?

There is one hideous black metal hag of a witch on the weather vane atop my shed, she is Evil, she is reflected upon by the upwardly mobile (perpetuum)[.] Do you know these people who only believe that money is intelligent? The saw blade is now behind my neck with thin windows between me & it.<sup>10</sup>

The letter is typical of those to be found in the record of Mendelssohn's correspondence with Oliver and Notley (though most often solely with Oliver) in her archive at the University of Sussex. Of the twenty-odd documents in Mendelssohn's hand, ranging between half a page and six pages long, only about a dozen or so can be considered complete letters, of which about half are dated. In amongst them are pages of illustrations, references to literary texts, what appear to be drafts or cancelled letters, and personal notes, along with tiny scraps and fragments of poetry and quotation. Only three letters from Oliver to Mendelssohn are to be found in the archive, raising the question of whether Mendelssohn in fact sent all those she wrote to Oliver, though Oliver in one of the three apologises to Mendelssohn for not having replied to 'your more detailed letters which accompanied the process of preparing the poem ['1:3ng'] for publication.'<sup>11</sup> This brief, awkward letter suggests an intensity of correspondence on Mendelssohn's side that Oliver was unwilling or unable to reciprocate; he writes that 'I'm shy of commenting on all that you told me [...] your

life-history is so intricate that I would feel shod in clogs if I went blundering in with remarks which would seem platitudes to you.<sup>12</sup> One might sympathise with Oliver's embarrassment. Does he know of anyone who could 'rescue' Mendelssohn and 'throw [her into] the creation of the beautiful side of life?' Presumably not. The meandering and paratactic biographical portraits which Mendelssohn's letters paint do not conform to a model of authorial correspondence in which opinions are exchanged and issues debated on a field of intellectual exchange. They are full of descriptions of Mendelssohn's persecution by those forces which '[stem] from Antipathy to Poetry,' a source that merges in the letters with a general and figurative, though deeply felt, atmosphere of lethal threat, one that transforms, in the case of the letter quoted here, Mendelssohn's neighbour's garden trimmer into a 'saw blade [...] behind [her] neck,' and the 'weather vane atop [her] shed' into a malevolent emblem of 'Evil,' a 'hideous black metal hag of a witch.' The correspondence returns incessantly to the 'gross injustice' articulated here, to which Mendelssohn gives many names. Some of these include, but are not limited to: the fact that she has been 'wrongly accused,' 'the pornographic libelling of me [...] used for political purposes,' the 'Detestation of women with minds,' the abandonment of Mendelssohn by the fathers of her children ('they deserted me and I was made homeless'), the 'women [who] militated against me,' her treatment as a 'Jewess' by malicious anti-Semites in Cambridge and elsewhere, and other painfully impersonal claims on her person, which include a 'virtual social policy to make me speak.'<sup>13</sup>

At least the first and second of these names for injustice can, and should, be interpreted as direct references to Mendelssohn's conviction and incarceration, between 1971–1976, for terrorist offenses carried out in the name of the British radical left-wing cell, the Angry Brigade, and her subsequent sexist caricaturing by the British tabloid press.<sup>14</sup> The 'virtual social policy to make me speak' refers, at least in part, to attempts by journalists to contact Mendelssohn and her family in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> But even these names refuse to reside solely within the facts of biographical data, and are almost always expressed in terms that spill beyond the bounds of their historical signification into a general environment of murderous intent, usually coming to rest within Mendelssohn's deepest sense of herself as a poet, or as a Jewish woman, or



as both: 'My writing is for the most part unavailable as I have been wrongly accused. as [*sic*] was my father by the Anti-semitic,' she explains to Oliver, at once conflating abstract unjust accusation with both a stricken authorship and the victims of mid twentieth-century racism.<sup>16</sup> Responding to the initial request from Oliver and Notley for a submission to *Gare du Nord*, Mendelssohn writes:

I have two fast long (relatively) poems which I shall rewrite after next week when I am teaching literature according to surrealism and Edmund Husserl – which is however faltering [*sic*] by what I should possibly attempt to convey given that I am being unnerved by libellous misconceptions which I cannot possibly (rather) address any more directly today than I could in the horrible 1960's.

Libel here is causally associated by Mendelssohn with her 'faltering' ability to write, and to teach literature – to be among writers and their writing – in much the same way as the description of her being 'wrongly accused' becomes fused with that accusation's abusive designs on her authorship and heritage. It is as if none of these names for injustice, especially accusation and libel, indeed the whole history of Mendelssohn's condemnation as a political terrorist by the courts and the press, are really by themselves capacious or adequate enough to fully contain or express what the poet has suffered and what she has lost. The public image of Anna Mendelssohn as a political figure is singled out in the correspondence as a particularly vile and damaging incursion into her personhood. 'I detest being used for political purposes,' she writes, and elsewhere, 'I was a victim of political harassment,' 'I am not involved in politics,' 'I am [not] even remotely interested in politics,' and 'politics ruins everything.'<sup>17</sup> The line with which Mendelssohn begins the letter quoted above, 'I don't want this turning poems into political acts,' makes plain, despite its syntactical oddity, that poems are, for her, emphatically not 'political acts,' if only because they risk 'turning' into ones. What are they? Something that politics is not. Mendelssohn was 'quite in favour of becoming a rich dynamic creative artist & that was slated in my generation [...] I don't have any political ambitions.'<sup>18</sup> The injustice

that 'stems from Antipathy to Poetry,' of which politics partakes, nominates poetry as that which, however ruined and/or in danger of further ruination, retains in Mendelssohn's thought an extraordinary power of self-definition. It is this power that politics in particular, among the many enemies of poetry, would kill, can kill, and has, in some sense, already killed many times over. 'I think of poetry all the time and know what poetry is not,' she asserts, 'and I was a poetess who was watching her life being removed.'<sup>19</sup> And elsewhere: 'That I revere Poetry and praise the world where it exists, is really all I should commit to paper now for divisions have been made and in the mind there should be no divisions.'<sup>20</sup> Politics *tout court* emerges in the letters as a violently divisive power that sunders the mind of the artist, who is in turn determined to 'resist Wars' and who staunchly identifies as a pacifist: 'I am a pacifist. I don't fight, I resist.'<sup>21</sup> Poetry, by contrast, is an instrument of this resistance. In the correspondence with Oliver, poetry is a world apart and a house under siege: 'Poetry alienates no-one, it is a home,' Mendelssohn writes, and in a harrowing description of her treatment by the fathers of her children, states that 'although they deserted me and I was made homeless – so it was a struggle up a virtual precipice – but poetry is stronger than death[.]'<sup>22</sup>

The style of these metaphors of habitation shift slightly between prose and verse, but they nevertheless remain a touchstone for both. In *Implacable Art*, poetry retains its formidable strength, its durability, and its sanctuary, but it is a home under constant surveillance, subject to constant harassment:

how can there be love when there is no memory?  
 I created a world of art for my children  
 to live in. But I am required to  
 Leave my world of art & Repent<sup>23</sup>

The question is a Platonic one reminiscent of the erotic cosmology of *Phaedrus*; love, the resonance suggests, is the re-kindled image of the divine in earthly objects. And the 'world of art' in this passage seems virtually akin to the celestial forms from which, according to Socrates, the memory of beauty is drawn in loving. That

Mendelssohn is 'required' to leave such a world '& Repent' describes a lapsarian tragedy, the proportions of which are made especially jarring by the chronological and ideological distance traversed, between the Platonic forms and Old Testament sin, in the rhetorical brevity of a mere four lines. The 'world where [poetry] exists' is a 'memory' that must be preserved in autonomous idealism from its enemies, but its 'memory' on human terms, in the mind of the 'poetess' Anna Mendelssohn, must also be the permanent record of the destruction of her life by those same enemies. The labour of this memory's maintenance is riddled with trials. In one long letter to Oliver, Mendelssohn writes that

My difficulty lies in opposing and therefore condemning minds which do not honour Literature which I see as having been demoted due to the lack of observation of the laws of silence governing the respect of the fallen.<sup>24</sup>

The phrase is typically abstruse. It combines a highly ritualistic vocabulary reminiscent of the Book of Lamentations (Lamentations 2:10: 'The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence') with the embattled poetic wellsprings of Mendelssohn's creativity given shape and human form: 'the fallen' (the desolation of Jerusalem) is/are aligned with 'Literature,' whilst her lyric pronoun remains trapped under the exaggerated indictment that I noted above, 'a virtual social policy to speak,' and therefore to break the respectful silence that only sanctified interiority could maintain imperviously. What is legible here is something like a traumatic ambivalence between what is done to Mendelssohn and what is done to 'Literature': Mendelssohn's sense of her persecution marries literal Hebrew lamentation to the holiness of literary pursuit under threat. *Implacable Art* contains a number of examples of the difficulties to which Mendelssohn refers in the letter; here is one:

life brought me love of art, & by my  
own endeavour brought me the powers of  
concentration to swear my oaths  
for poetry was the sworn oath between

my soul and the mind and the intangible  
particularly, not the loud fish & chip poems  
were for the assimilationists, now also<sup>25</sup>

At times the intensely private, yet absolute alterity of poetry must be preserved against those particularly insidious enemies of poetry, bad poems, cheap as the tabloid slander in which 'fish & chip[s]' came wrapped. Mendelssohn's 'sworn oath' is here the strictest possible specimen of 'opposing and therefore condemning': fidelity between the poet's deepest sense of her being and 'the intangible' finer spirit of creativity faces off against the desubjectified conformist rabble. This poem ends here, gesturing perhaps at its own abandonment by the poet in the face of the encroaching 'assimilationists,' those who would presumably dishonour 'the intangible' spirit of poesy by consuming literature like a greasy dinner. At other times, poetry is less ardently Platonic a conception and instead a more delicate aesthetic pleasure, though in equally dire straits:

[...] I knew  
how terrible it was to be given orders that  
were confused like people drawling out  
more specifically poesie has its time  
it is attended to without fear, & when there is  
fear of retribution it flies to the light  
or falls silently into the pitch dark.<sup>26</sup>

No strict glossary of terms governs the writing: silence in this poem is muted fearfulness, not the stolid defiance importuned by 'loud fish & chip poems,' nor the interior sanctity implied negatively by those who dishonour 'Literature' in the course of refusing to observe 'the laws of silence governing the respect of the fallen.' But despite the shifting metaphorical array, the beleaguered autonomy of 'poesie' retains, here as throughout *Implacable Art*, the status of the 'world of art,' the 'sworn oath,' the fearless temporal safe haven. Poetry's law circumscribes these

oases of feeling and desire, but with no adulation, or straightforward celebration of the art; it circumscribes them by necessity against the callous invaders who would suck them dry. The reason I believe the value of 'poetry' in Mendelssohn's work to be profoundly negative, and not just reactionary, is because poetry's law, far from claiming the inalienable victory of the immutable beauties of 'poesie' over material and spiritual immiseration, instead holds that the individuated architecture of verse is the only environment that can guarantee immiseration's authentic vocalisation. By being capacious enough to describe, in all its torturous detail, Mendelssohn's destruction, poetry enables her creative mind to survive in the savage chronicle of her life's removal. Throughout the poetry, even more so than in the correspondence, Mendelssohn's sense of herself is in a kind of warring metonymy; lyric as artistic self-emplacement, as the representation of art itself, is an endeavour fraught with the present, searing memory of its anterior failure. The oath *was* sworn, the habitat *created*; but 'fear of retribution' (let alone 'retribution' itself) sours the oath and demolishes the habitat. The poet does not (only or merely) retreat into her 'world of art' in nostalgic asceticism, but is (also) endlessly 'required' to 'Leave' it in order to fashion on writing's ruined threshold the possibility of living through death. It is in this sense, I think, that we should understand Mendelssohn's claim that 'I don't fight. I resist.' The overriding function of art in her writing is emphatically not positive transcendence, but restlessly negative reflection.<sup>27</sup> Here is the first half of a poem of which the last lines have already been quoted:

**if we are not careful** we shall be glad to die.  
we shall have conformed to the laws of time.  
done nothing other than conform to  
the idea that life is hell on earth and  
art has decided to subject us to its  
flaming will, even power brokers  
learning to swivel in office chairs  
forget that art is unplaced, is summoned.<sup>28</sup>

The bold type in the first line of this poem makes clear the conditional premise on which the first three sentences of this poem rest, and makes clear too that *Implacable Art* will resist to the last a merely enervating despair. Life is not the pettish nihilism of the doom-mongers, nor art some weapon of their apocalypse. The 'careful' labour of poetry does not allow art to 'subject us to its/flaming will,' but to articulate the 'unplaced,' 'summoned' mutability of wilful poetic subjectivity. If there is more than a hint of the mystical here, then such mysticism draws its strength in idealist opposition to the 'power brokers' whose office-chair positivism is an especially beige kind of purgatory. Poetry, 'stronger than death,' as Mendelssohn wrote to Oliver, is nevertheless foregrounded, both in that statement and throughout *Implacable Art*, in determinate relation to the powers of death, never in the realms of untouchable, let alone paradisiacal, immortality. As such it cannot be the heaven of the soul. But it will ensoul the poet in the world in which her creative labour carries on, a world which, for all of Mendelssohn's anti-nihilism in 'if we are not careful...', so often resembles, for her, a living hell.<sup>29</sup>

As the enemies of poetry converge upon the life of the poet, so the poet contains within her work the murdered victims of her enemies:

– it was once obvious that  
young idealists and dreamers  
were the enemies of the economy.  
I wouldn't have let that happen either.  
or the familial curses.  
or the skin culture.  
or trying to work out  
how I was murdered.  
how libel & slander kills.  
through literary veins.  
how arp's sculptured reliefs  
spoke to me from behind glass

cases. how I know how I act dead,  
 how satisfying it is for some actresses  
 to lock up playwrights  
 how T.S. Eliot words are borne out  
 how futile to be told that one is  
 celebrating,  
 is it always a toss-up?<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps with one eye on a more naive and impressionistic version of herself, Mendelssohn seems to suggest here that she 'wouldn't have let' those 'young dreamers and idealists' become the 'enemies of the economy,' before cataloguing her murder (and that of her reputation) in a series of 'how [...]' clauses that strain their organizing syntactical principle the further they stray down the left margin from the conditional 'wouldn't' that inaugurates them. Mendelssohn 'wouldn't have let' the 'familial curses' 'happen,' nor the 'skin culture,' nor – and at this point the grammar becomes powerfully ambivalent – '[the] trying to work out/how I was murdered,' 'how libel & slander kills,' nor any of the subsequent iterations of 'work[ing] out' which follow. In one sense, these lines read as though their subject would not have suffered all that she has been forced to endure – the sole exception, determined, as usual, by the norm's murderous designs, is the 'relief' she finds in Jean Arp's sculpture, the levity of the pun escaping for a split second an adversarial litany of political miscreants ('enemies of the economy'), slander, and literary conformism (in the canonical shape of Eliot). In this reading, the poet's polite but doomed preference not to have to 'work out/how I was murdered' is itself simply another casualty of the forces against which poetry's law organizes a habitable space for their expression. But there is also a sense in which the syntactical straining that goes on as the lines accumulate makes a summative reading such as the one I have just offered less than satisfactory. In particular, the words 'or' and 'how' in the passage quoted above seem to exercise a deliberately anti-grammatical emphatic pressure of iterative urgency, an urgency that actively eschews semantic consistency in favour of a practically incanta-

tory drama of efficacious speech. This happens elsewhere in *Implacable Art* as well. The poem 'To have life taken twice that is terrible...' consists almost entirely of comparable anaphoric lines beginning with the infinitive verbs 'to not want,' 'to be,' 'to have,' 'to dance,' 'to apologise,' to 'clasp', and 'to find', whilst a fragment late on in the book is in large part composed around the synonymic and assonantal relatives of the word 'no,' and reads, in its first two lines: 'I have been made of no. n° certainly. no no/No one non person, anon, nothing, nada, & never.'<sup>31</sup> This kind of breaking-apart into the elemental constituents of linguistic possibility reaches a crescendo at those moments in the verse when the murdered subject of Mendelssohn's poetry is most vividly evoked, when poetry's law demarcates a particularly fragile threshold between the lyric subject – Anna Mendelssohn, the subject of art – and the extinction of life she survives to communicate. In order to understand this evocation, and to think through it by the lights of a tradition with which Mendelssohn herself identified, I want to turn to some recent scholarship on the status of lament in Jewish thought, before returning to Mendelssohn's work for a discussion of the superlatively lamenting precursor to *Implacable Art*, '1:3ng.'

Before I do, it is worth pausing to reflect on the nature of the poetic life I have been describing. Mendelssohn's work, as already mentioned, is vast and various, of which her published poetry, not to mention the visual art with which the writing is interspersed, represents only a tiny fraction. The present volume's contribution to a growing scholarship on Mendelssohn's work proves that my reading here is one among many, and that different pressures of attention and critical interest will inevitably map varying, and likely even contradictory, paths through the work and its sundry modes and methods of expression. And despite its extraordinary vision and extent, Mendelssohn's work does not exist in an historical vacuum. Her broadest themes and concerns – the politicised violence of everyday life, the lyric subject in an ever-renewed crisis of self-recognition and self-definition, the very relationship between politics and art in an era in which neither seem fully present, possible, or even in some painfully vague way *valid* – can be traced throughout the work of



Mendelssohn's contemporaries as strikingly different in approach and tone as Tom Raworth, John Wilkinson, Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver, Barry MacSweeney, and J.H. Prynne, to name only a few. But nowhere in the works of these poets, except perhaps in the complex Medieval and mystical echoes in the work of Douglas Oliver, does 'poetry' retain anything like the antagonistic verity with which it is imbued in Mendelssohn's writing, and even in Oliver's work this value is for the most part delicately implied, never identified in such excoriating conflict against the enemies of creative life as it is in Mendelssohn's. How do we read this identity? One way to do so would be to fold the complexities of the writing back on to the biography of Anna Mendelssohn, and to draw from the history of her suffering an imperative final cause for escapism into the 'world of art' which nevertheless remains out of reach. Elements of this approach are necessary to fully understand the sense of injustice that animates the work. But such an approach on its own would also be unable to account either for the particular ways in which poetry's law operates on the besieged border of a tortured life, or indeed for the relation of the work to any kind of suffering that was outside of the analogical remit of Anna Mendelssohn's personal history. Whilst I do believe, as will be clear from what follows, that Mendelssohn's work bears a significance beyond the record of an author's struggle to exist in a world that has treated her with such animadversion, it is undeniable that the voice Mendelssohn lends in her poetry to suffering is very much her own artistic voice beset by its own particular enemies. And whilst to relativize the suffering in Mendelssohn's poetry out of all existence would be as insufficient an approach as an attempt to ground it solely in her biography, the idiosyncratic nature of her enemies often makes it difficult to draw from Mendelssohn's work conclusions about the nature of suffering beyond those that it states itself. Mendelssohn's is a fiercely individualistic oeuvre that rejects all forms of social solidarity (outside of a select group of poets and publishers) on the grounds that such forms strip from the poet her sovereign powers of imaginative creative labour, and the oeuvre is furthermore broadly disinterested in, if not explicitly combative towards, any theoretical social critique, whether anarchist, anti-capitalist, or feminist, beyond the example of what is done by society to

poets like herself. Mendelssohn was well aware of this tendency within her work. 'I have never been able,' she writes in a letter to Oliver and Alice Notley, 'to define any object outside of myself completely successfully, partly this is the source of my Muse, & partly a reality.'<sup>32</sup> Here is another kind of threshold, once again negatively expressed, as the inability to 'define' the world beyond the speaking, writing self, and here is where Mendelssohn locates her 'Muse' and 'reality.' The nature of both, of Mendelssohn's Muse and the reality she divulges, will be the subject of the rest of this essay.

Recent scholarship on the 'cultural production of mourning' offers a range of perspectives on the linguistic and social coordinates of radical grief.<sup>33</sup> These perspectives enable a reading of Mendelssohn's work – of poetry's law and the murdered subject that it speaks – in relation to the features of lamentation in the Jewish tradition. To read Mendelssohn's work in this way is not (necessarily) to claim a principle of composition on the author's part, but instead to recognize that her labour of 'trying to work out/how I was murdered' performs a fidelity to historical trauma comparable, in its singular refusal to be placated, with the ways in which modern scholars understand traditional Jewish lament, and furthermore to approach some of the ramifications for thinking about history and community that Mendelssohn's work might share with the tradition. Mendelssohn makes frequent reference to her Jewish heritage in *Implacable Art* and in the letters to Oliver, always within the matrix of the persecuted identity the poet shares with 'poetry' and 'art.' In the letter quoted in full, above, in which Mendelssohn asks whether Oliver might know anyone that could 'throw [her] Into the creation of the beautiful side of life,' she asks too, in rhetorical alternative to the 'beautiful side of life,' whether she should 'go back' to 'St. Petersburg or Budapest or Warsaw or Prague – or Siberia? [...] or Silesia? or Galicia?' All of these places are associated with either centuries-old Jewish settlement, or traditional and modern persecution of their Jewish populations, or both. 'Because I am a female,' she writes to Oliver in another letter, 'my intellect is despised or ignored. Because I was born a Jewess I am not permitted to boast my virtue(s).'<sup>34</sup> 'Jewess,' for Mendelssohn, is, at least partly, another of those subjects (or another

facet of that kind of subject) contemptible to the enemies of poetry. As such, and in accordance with poetry's law, in *Implacable Art* the poet's Jewishness is an aspect both of a persecuted identity, and of a subject resistant to the persecutory interpellation through which she is evoked. What I want to concentrate on here, however, is not quite identity, but the historical form which compels identity to express in isolation the destruction of the life it treasures, and that form is lament. In his opening remarks on 'Eikhah and the Stance of Lamentation' in the recent volume of essays *Lament in Jewish Thought*, Moshe Halbertal glosses the Hebrew biblical *eikh* or *eikhah* [how] in the following terms:

The 'how' of the lament expresses not a loss, but a trauma; it is an expression of the undermining of our capacity to read reality as a whole. In its more acute form such a 'how' is an expression of the trauma of abuse, in which the affliction originates from the hand of the father who was supposed to be the protector, providing loving shelter from the sorrows of the world [...] The solitude of the lamenter is very different from that of the mourner; it is grounded in a complete inability to read reality or the world [...] In lamentation, language operates in full gear, reality doesn't make sense anymore, everyone has [been] betrayed, but language has stayed intact; it is the only weapon left. The posture of bewildered, isolated protest sharpens the expressive capacities; over generations of lamentation liturgy, poetry unfortunately has reached an insurmountable height.<sup>35</sup>

The essays collected in *Lament in Jewish Thought* comprise interpretations of traditional Hebrew texts, including the Book of Lamentations, as well as literary, theoretical, and anthropological discussions of the linguistic and philosophical phenomenon of 'lament' *per se*. Especially with regards to the philosophy of lamentation in modern Jewish thought, many of the essays draw for inspiration on the early work of the 'metaphysical psychologist' Gershom Scholem.<sup>36</sup> Thus lament is understood not only as a literary genre, but also as a specifically traumatised kind of language of which the ancient literary paradigm of lament, and its iterations in modern liturgy, mourning,

and poetry, partake. Halbertal's remarks offer a reading of the language of lament in which 'how' is not the indication of a question, but of a traumatic isolation in which '[destruction] is experienced as an instance of abuse.'<sup>37</sup> The first line of Lamentations, 'How [*Eikhah*] lonely sits the city, once great with people,' expresses for Halbertal the irrepressible incredulity of the lamenting subject in relation to the desolation they survey; 'how,' in other words, is not information-seeking, but emphatic: it qualifies without quantity the extent of the suffering it attempts to convey.<sup>38</sup> This suffering, in lament, is without end. In Halbertal's reading of the final verses of Lamentations,

Lament, which is a defiant bewildered protest, maintains its posture of solitude until the end. There is no catharsis and no consolation; the ability to predictably read the world is severely damaged. Trust in the known world – trust in a future promised reconciliation – is no longer there.<sup>39</sup>

If the source of Mendelssohn's 'Muse,' as she wrote, lay in her inability 'to define any object outside of myself completely successfully,' we might characterize this Muse as defiantly lamenting in just the sense that Halbertal construes, maintaining, as it does, its 'posture of solitude' in a state of 'severely damaged' apperception; the 'memory' of Mendelssohn's 'world of art' is elucidated in her poetry with comparable inconsolable defiance as the 'city, once great with people.' And Halbertal's gloss of *eikhah* makes clear that the iterative, dramatic function of Mendelssohn's 'how I was murdered./how libel and slander kills' invokes a scriptural precedent that works against the conceptual security of theodicy, and towards the irreconcilable trauma sustained in lamentation.

Gershom Scholem's early text 'On Lament and Lamentation' (1918) provides the starting point for a number of essays in *Lament in Jewish Thought*. In this complex, hermetic text, Scholem argues that lament is characterised not in opposition to any other type of language, but only in opposition to 'revelation itself.'<sup>40</sup> Lament, he contends, 'is nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border itself,' one that 'founds a completely autonomous order' in the transmission of what Scholem describes as an annihilated symbolism: 'it is always the not empty,

but extinguished expression, in which its death wish and its inability to die join together.<sup>41</sup> Paula Schwebel provides a concise gloss of Scholem's esoteric fragment:

Scholem regards the ruined language of lament as the extroversion of an introverted symbolism – as the fall of an expressionless truth into both knowledge and history [...] We come closest to this inexpressible core by attending to the ruins of the symbolic [...] Although the inner core has been destroyed, the ruin of the symbol yields an extrinsic structure (a border), from which the contours of the extinct symbolism can be deduced.<sup>42</sup>

The shattered mystery of the 'inexpressible core' of language – an idea, as Schwebel points out, that Scholem developed in close proximity to the work of his friend and collaborator Walter Benjamin – remains a metaphysical proposition, but one that functions in Scholem's thought as part of an historical schema in which the 'ruins of the symbolic' transmit the esoteric knowledge of the Hebrew tradition in, and through, lamentation; 'teaching and lament were intertwined,' he writes, 'such that it could come to pass that the teaching lamented and lament taught.'<sup>43</sup> The ramifications of this function of lament – what exactly we might learn from the 'teaching' it transmits – are developed across the essays in *Lament in Jewish Thought*. Rebecca Comay suggests that 'lament demands an acknowledgement that it knows to be fundamentally impossible,' because 'lament is not only an expression of pain but also an uneasy claim to legitimacy':

Amplifying my grief is a protest against the symbolic order that would discipline or silence this grief – the prohibitions, inhibitions, and disavowals that can conspire to make loss seem negligible and sorrow inadmissible. Lament in such cases redoubles.<sup>44</sup>

Comay's focus is lament as 'a speech-act [that] strains the very idea of legitimation,' but her argument also recalls the gendered, disruptive mourning of Greek tragedy – of Hecuba, Antigone, Medea, and Electra, women 'who carried mourning too far [...] whose grief drives them to violence [and who] are portrayed, in tragedy, as

sister spirits of the Erinyes, or Furies,' the Greek mythological epitome of feminine vengeance.<sup>45</sup> In the Hebrew tradition, too, lament is a gendered phenomenon. In her reading of *Lamentations*, Galit Hasan-Rokem points out that the gestures of lamenting therein are shared between 'the iconic female city and the concrete individual lamenting woman,' and that the 'female protagonist of chapters 1 and 2 [...] is both the lamenter and the bereaved mother, the suffering individual and the singer of the dirges.'<sup>46</sup> Mendelssohn's identification as a 'Jewess' takes on a performative aspect in the light of these readings, exacerbating the degree to which her inconsolable poetic subject, dispersed amongst the ruins of the life it mourns, protests that symbolic order – illustrated by the enemies of poetry – which would discipline or silence her. In the persecutory environment of the poetry and correspondence, Mendelssohn's very legitimacy as a subject is always at stake, and her claim to her own family's Jewish heritage might helpfully be read as a way of reaffirming an historical protest, however despairing, against centuries-old accusations of illegitimacy. Agata Bielik-Robson makes a compelling case for the shape this protest takes in lamentation's disruption of the historiographical, rather than symbolic, order:

*Kinah* [lament] [...] avoids the therapy of denegation by sticking close to the trauma that is being spoken out without being talked away [...] it tears open and magnifies the traumatic rift-wound that damages [...] the whole by the emergence of the separate I – the singular subject.<sup>47</sup>

For Bielik-Robson, the pedagogy of lament, which is 'silence disguised' in anguish, lies in its refusal of the 'reparatory function of speech.'<sup>48</sup> Following Scholem's emphasis on the incommunicable essence of language, Hebrew lamentation for Bielik-Robson preserves 'the traumatic moment of its origin (a cry of pain) and hence [suspends] the advent of meaning that would ultimately explain, comprehend, reconcile, and appease.'<sup>49</sup> Bielik-Robson's emphasis on the singularity of the subject's 'cry of pain' relates to what she calls the 'sacred anarchy of *kinah*,' its 'borderline' status between the pagan and religious worlds that maintains a 'critical means of suspicion and subversion' under historical monotheism:

[By] exposing the monotheistic reality as nothing but yet another mythic arrangement, which glosses over the individual's suffering, it [tragic trauma] reminds the tradition of its 'betrayal' – for this is precisely the world that revelation was supposed to leave behind for good. *Kinah* [...] is a necessary mark of this failure.<sup>50</sup>

*Kinah* is therefore 'creaturely testimony,' against the 'therapeutic chatter of institutional theodicy,' a spanner in the historiographical work of reconciliation that 'preserves in itself the unfallen quality of silence.'<sup>51</sup> Something of the belligerently anachronistic aura that 'poetry' retains in Mendelssohn's work stands, I think, in the same relation to its enemies as does *kinah* in relation to the betrayal of revelation on Bielik-Robson's terms: as a devastated affront to the world, the historical progress of which begets the justifications of objective providence instead of the historical commitment to the 'singular trauma.'

The work of suspension that Bielik-Robson and her fellow scholars describe is not purely negative, but in fact finally messianic: it 'preserves the promise of the messianic event' in paradoxical fidelity to the inexpressible.<sup>52</sup> Now, by suggesting that we read Anna Mendelssohn's poetry as lament, I am not suggesting that we should understand poetry's law in her work as in some sense 'really' legislating redemption, negatively invoked at the far end of her 'creaturely testimony.' Poetry's law in Mendelssohn's work exhibits the formal contours of lamentation in the Jewish tradition, though its faith remains bound to the lyrical and human, not messianic and mysterious, truth of language: an original, and originally gendered, 'cry of pain' is preserved in her work in shattered outline against the enemies of poetry, precluding any normative ratio of compensation, and bound finally not to the distant community of the young Scholem's Zion, but to poetry itself, the autonomous realm of art that 'alienates no-one.' The murdered subject survives in the legible outline of her extinction, and she survives to evince herself in the habitation of composition:

I have been made of no. n° certainly. no no  
No one non person, anon, nothing, nada, & never,

Not now, numb, nit, nip, in the air, a cold,  
 Dead from the start, absent, girl, nothing, not a boy,  
 The joy & the glory, a girl, fussing about  
 Cleanliness and pianos and poetry.  
 No. Miss no. a nanny goat, a ninny, winning for  
 Others but not for herself. an ass's head. an nn.<sup>53</sup>

Poetry like this lyricises the transmissible ruins of the symbolic characteristic of Jewish lament into the communicable fragments of a poet holding on for dear life. Out of the paranomasia of negativity with which this poem wrestles finally emerges a stuttering approximation of 'Anna,' 'an nn': not the positive identification of a name, 'Dead from the start,' but a sound that withholds in breathless desperation the completion of its utterance, and refuses the 'therapy of denegation' that would utter that name anew. *Implacable* art is just this: holding tight in lamentation to the ruined life whose uncomplicated assertion would dehumanise the shattered poet, but whose negative elucidation preserves her 'singular subject' against historical injustice. If we detect more than a shred of what might be called bad faith in Mendelssohn's lament, more than a germ of unreasonable – perhaps even offensive – poetic licence in her translation into lyric testimony of what is after all, though spoken in the solitude emphasised by Halbertal, a cry of generational anguish responsive to the destruction of multitudes (for this is the 'singular trauma' of Lamentations), then I think we do nothing more than justice to the extremity of Mendelssohn's project. And this caveat necessitates another, more prosaic one: Anna Mendelssohn was not *really* murdered; there was *no such thing* as a 'policy,' 'virtual' or otherwise, to 'make her speak' and therefore force her to break the 'unfallen quality of silence' which she maintains in writing 'Literature.' It is important to recognise these facts of historical biography here, near to the end of this essay, because their truth exacerbates to breaking point the disproportion to which the formal characteristics of lamentation in Mendelssohn's poetry contribute, and its truth is that upon which the reception of her work *as* lamentation, which I have been proposing, must finally contend. Mendelssohn's is not the lamentation of the



city of Jerusalem, nor of the Jewish people and their centuries of persecution, and the invocation of this pre-history of the poetic voice which populates her writing puts an enormous strain on the lyric. I said above that it would do no good to simply relativize Mendelssohn's suffering out of all existence; it does no good either to pretend that her suffering was so catastrophically unique that it represents an historical break akin to the betrayal of revelation. What I think we must do is read the lament that poetry's law professes as an extraordinary object lesson in literature's capacity to represent the subject at its most intolerably strained capacity *to yet make grounds for community possible*; it is in this sense that I read the expression of suicidal martyrdom in the last line of the poem beginning 'I have been made of no. n° certainly': 'for/Others but not for herself.'<sup>54</sup> If poetry is a 'home' that 'alienates no-one,' it is theoretically still possible for that 'home' to contain the multitudinous 'Others' who as yet may only be discerned as landlords and bailiffs. If there is no messianic residue at the end of the subjective struggle of *Implacable Art* – and it seems incontrovertible that there is not – there may nevertheless be heard in the lyric speech emergent from the 'disguised silence' of its lament the faint sound of something like partisanship in favour of the future subjects of poetry's law, or, solidarity with a community the relational conditions of which are not yet positively conceivable, but whose possibility of emergence is assured. I hear this sound despite Mendelssohn's own desultorily anti-political stance, because any anti-political protestation entails political ramifications. It is with this speculation in mind that I turn in conclusion to a poem basically contemporary with *Implacable Art*, and which amplifies the grief of *Implacable Art's* subject to practically insurmountable heights.

'1:3ng,' the solicitation of which for the first issue of Oliver and Notley's *Gare du Nord* was the first basis for the correspondence we have already seen, is one of the most sorrowful poems of late modernist British lyric. It begins as follows:

There is this idea that but I would not because of the choking & swallowing  
Abbreviations, large writing hitting me, & saying nothing if I were on the menu  
To be hitting me with a simple tune, stretching out expressive signs, tut.<sup>55</sup>

The opening line performs in microcosm the poem's central conflict, between the poet's articulation of her creative mind and the motivated impediments she faces from the enemies of poetry. 'There is this idea' is denied the expostulation of its deictic content, discordantly interrupted as it is by 'but I would not because of,' with which 'the choking & swallowing' expresses a (semantically) painfully abstract, yet (sensorially) life-threatening, causal relation; 'choking & swallowing' is, at least syntactically, the reason that '[she] would not' articulate 'this idea.' The work of those doing the 'choking' is more starkly apparent in '1:3ng' than anywhere in *Implacable Art*, their murderous designs more bluntly articulated, and more bathetically lamented, than in the later collection. The attacks on the poet's sex and artistry are attacks on art itself; attacks on art and poetry are fuelled by misogyny and philistinism. The attackers are myriad. An exemplary list would include: 'Politicized mediators [who] used/To destroy me,' who 'Wanted art cleanly dead,' 'communists,' who 'told you the price of their sweaters' as they 'Rammed you in the street with their bicycles,' 'teachers' who 'openly espoused fascism,' 'women' who are 'waiting to take away my womb,' whoever it was who 'Enforced sex education,' and 'People who play war games.'<sup>56</sup> The poet who testifies to her destruction by these enemies holds fast to art, and to artists; they are the centre of her lamentation's gravity. 'Blake and Turner. Our two strongest artists. Strong enough to isolate me from total predation,' she writes, pre-empting the defiant sanctuary under siege that is 'poetry' in *Implacable Art*.<sup>57</sup> The poet's mind is thus the poem's heart. Nowhere else in Mendelssohn's published poetry does the sense of her professed inability to define the world outside of herself take on such embattled responsibility for her survival. But much like *Implacable Art*'s siege mentality, and in accordance with poetry's law, such defiance in '1:3ng' is not the positive transcendence of what it calls 'this cutthroat world,' but an interiority carved out in the midst of the poet's already successful elimination, an interiority only audible in the present expression of its anterior resolve.<sup>58</sup> In the same poem that simply states 'I am not allowed to live,' and that 'it is easy' to 'Destroy my imaginative power,' we find such declarations of persistence in the past tense as: 'what I wanted to write/Was intact in my mind.'<sup>59</sup> In order to be 'strong enough to isolate' the poet

from 'total predation,' poetry's law preserves *in memoriam* the ruined symbolism of poetic creativity.<sup>60</sup> '1:3ng' is a brutal poem. Its narrative of murderous persecution is harrowing to read, and its defensive structures of 'isolation' full of the desperation of the persecuted. Occasionally it descends into a kind of solipsistic depression: 'Only I find my mind interesting,' and 'Only I am another Irina Ratushinskaya,' are lines that would seem unwieldy and arrogant, even gauche, outside of the remit of poetry's law; again we must remind ourselves that Mendelssohn, despite all she went through, was not *really* sent to a gulag and stripped of her citizenship for Soviet-defined 'agitation,' as was the Russian dissident poet with whom she identifies.<sup>61</sup> Within the remit of poetry's law, and in the shadow of the tradition of lamentation from which it draws its strength, these kinds of lines are still awkward, and still disproportionate; but their very disproportion amplifies the poet's grief precisely in order to evacuate proportion and legitimacy as normative standards of protest against suffering. The unanswerable question that radiates through '1:3ng' is this one, impelled by the poem's brash insensitivity to mourning quietly: how much suffering is cause for how much sorrow? To ask this question is to unsettle from their ideological calcification the standards of mourning that apportion grief into its nominally observed quantities according to established social practice. The political consequences of reading Mendelssohn's poetry as lament may not be spectacular, but they are real, and stem, I think, from the sheer insistence of the murdered subject's survival. In '1:3ng' this insistence is given a musical quality, its perseverance sustained through an extended aural metaphor. '1:3ng,' as Mendelssohn explains to Oliver, refers to 'the point on the piano where three strings change into one (for the lower octaves).'<sup>62</sup> The poem is set almost entirely in extremely long-lined tercets of the kind already seen – the sole exception being the closing couplet – in mimetic representation of piano strings. The three lines of each of the forty-four tercets make a single unit by their disposition on the page, but only the final couplet gives a vaguely pictorial indication of lowering pitch, of a final slackening, in accordance with the title. The association of music with both persecution and sustenance runs throughout the poem, especially with regards to the singing voice, so that the experience of 'stretching out expressive signs' becomes both agonisingly oppressive and strenuously resistant; 'I am tortured.

I am taut,' Mendelssohn states near the end of the poem, in a bloody pun that conjures the image of a body on the rack, but not yet broken.<sup>63</sup> Poetry's law 'stretches out' the poet's 'expressive signs' to a pitch of absolutely unendurable magnitude, her body at the mercy of her persecutors doomed to a Promethean repetition that is itself the communicable ruination of life.

'Some music is social & mine isn't,' writes Mendelssohn in '1:3ng.'<sup>64</sup> If the spirit of survival in Mendelssohn's work is staunchly individualistic, the fact that she survives in the communicable ruins of her life at all – under the auspices of poetry's law – communicates something in itself: despite Mendelssohn's anti-social protestations, solidarity with the victims of trauma begins to emerge as the groundwork for a pre-political community of the dispossessed.<sup>65</sup> No law governs admission into this hypothetical community, and none rules over it, except that of poetry. Mendelssohn's project retains in this sense the practically Platonic imaginary discussed above, combined with a kind of libertarian anarchism which endeavours to make life and art coextensive with each other. But it also makes emphatically clear that art is the essential precondition of the survival of traumatised life:

I feel gashed down the entire length of the left side of my body  
 A jagged nasty gash cut through by a rotary stainless steel blade.  
  
 A giant C.D. spinning a fast cut through my dire life.  
 & I am about to sit down to translate Gisèle Prassinos' "La Table de Famille."

*Implacable Art* ends in a similar vein:

someone else is walking  
 out of their past,  
 in the clear light  
 of grey eyes, a new lamp  
 has been installed  
 it is square flat onto  
 the wall lower than

half way down, the sun  
 at this time of year ...  
 i was translating ...

Mendelssohn was enough of a Nietzschean to know that every conclusion is a consolation, which is why both of these major works end, after the splintering of the subject – in the first instance her grisly dismemberment, in the second her meiosis into the speaking subject and a 'someone else' – by an assertion of literary labour that not only commits to the expression of another's voice, but also to the temporally inconclusive nature of the task, whether in anticipation ('I am about to') or memorial ('i was translating'). The poems end their laments with the indication of the writerly work that must continue to ensure the poet's survival under poetry's law. Beyond the life of Anna Mendelssohn, what these poems inaugurate is an astonishingly vital mode of contemporary lament. Whether or not they offer any kind of consolation, sympathy, or *help* for anybody's else's 'dire life' is, I think, a moot point, because their determined focus is the presently ineradicable habitation in which the 'singular trauma' of their subject can survive. But in this very achievement lies the poems' most enduring political legacy. To lament in the fashion of Mendelssohn's poetry is not the consummation of despair, but the interminable labour of fidelity to the life ruined by the motivated infliction of suffering, yours or someone else's. This is not to offer comfort, but comradeship.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Eleanor Careless, Sara Crangle, Grace Manson, and Keston Sutherland for conversations about Mendelssohn's work that contributed to the composition of the present essay.
- <sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay I read 'art' and 'poetry' in Mendelssohn's writing synonymously, as she for the most part seems to understand them. I acknowledge the failings of this approach given the huge amount of visual art that Mendelssohn produced and that I do not discuss here, though I hope that by focussing on the writing I might illuminate something of the characteristics of both.
- <sup>3</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, *Implacable Art* (Applecross, Western Australia and Great Wilbraham, UK: Folio and Equipage, 2000), p. 53 (henceforth *IA*); SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1. All references beginning 'SxMs' refer to the files of Mendelssohn's correspondence housed in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive (1928–2013), University of Sussex Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton, UK.
- <sup>4</sup> Grace Lake, '1:3ng,' in Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley, ed., *Gare du Nord: A Magazine of Poetry and Opinion from Paris* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 1997), p. 14; *IA*, p. 64.
- <sup>5</sup> *IA*, p. 34, p. 43.

- <sup>6</sup> The line is from '1:3ng,' p. 15, though it might stand as an epigraph to the entire oeuvre.
- <sup>7</sup> In a poem titled 'virago.' in *Implacable Art* (p. 56) Mendelssohn writes 'you reminded me of nazis'; in '1:3ng' the speaker recalls her abuse by those who 'called themselves communists once, they taught Marx, told you the price of their sweaters. // Rammed you in the street with their bicycles' (p. 14).
- <sup>8</sup> There are moments in Mendelssohn's poetry and letters, however, that do seem to allude specifically to the actual language and tone of the Book of Lamentations; some of these are mentioned in what follows, though I expect many more will be discovered.
- <sup>9</sup> See Agata Bielik-Robson, 'The Unfallen Silence: *Kinah* and the Other Origin of Language,' in Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel, ed., *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), pp. 133–152 (133, 135) (henceforth *LJT*). Emphasis in original. My gratitude to Sam Dolbear for pointing out to me the existence of this volume.
- <sup>10</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2. Nothing resembling anything as substantial as a seventeen-page letter to Oliver appears in the archive.
- <sup>11</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/3.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1; SxMs109/5/A/21; SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.
- <sup>14</sup> For details of these caricatures, see Sara Crangle's introduction to Mendelssohn's 'What a Performance,' in *PLMA*, Vol. 133, No. 3 (May, 2018), pp. 610–630.
- <sup>15</sup> See SxMs109/3/A/1/6 (a letter to Mendelssohn's local councillor Anne Campbell, which complains of the unwanted attentions of journalists), SxMs109/3/A/1/55 (a letter to Iain Sinclair in which Mendelssohn refers to journalistic attention to her family), and for later instances of the same issue see SxMs109/3/A/1/59 and SxMs109/3/B/6 (both regarding the BBC in the early 2000s).
- <sup>16</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1. And see also SxMs109/3/A/1/6: 'The 'Independent' newspaper has recently sent a journalist more than once to my parents' home and I cannot communicate through that barrier that I am not the revolutionary militant I was assumed to be and I cannot talk to the Press or anyone else on that premise. Writing is a quite a slow process – its silence frustrates people – and they become very angry with me. I feel terrible having to live in [*sic*] this road – it doesn't have any hope about it and I was not allowed to come into areas such as this unless accompanied by my father when he was canvassing for the Labour Party.' A few lines later in the same letter Mendelssohn states that 'Jewish people were only admitted into Universities in this country without having to swear allegiance to the Church of England, late last century.'
- <sup>17</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1; SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.
- <sup>18</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.
- <sup>19</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.
- <sup>20</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. The letter from which this second quotation is taken is struck-through, likely indicating a cancelled draft.
- <sup>23</sup> *JA*, p. 13. I read 'art' in poems like this, in accordance with the value placed on 'poetry' in the letters and elsewhere in the poems, in terms of literary art.
- <sup>24</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.
- <sup>25</sup> *JA*, p. 43.
- <sup>26</sup> *JA*, p. 42.
- <sup>27</sup> To couch this argument in terms that expand Mendelssohn's own metaphor: the work does not gain

ground, let alone move the frontier; it reclaims territory in resistance to the occupying forces.

<sup>28</sup> *IA*, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> See also Mendelssohn's statement in *IA* that 'i'll take care & not/ally with any who sour minds. stupid.' (p. 53). 'Care' in the poetry is a defensive position.

<sup>30</sup> *IA*, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> *IA*, p. 10, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.

<sup>33</sup> I borrow the phrase from Galit Hasan-Rokem, 'Bodies Performing in Ruins: The Lamenting Mother in Ancient Hebrew Texts,' in *LJT*, pp. 33–63 (51).

<sup>34</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Halbertal, '*Eikhah* and the Stance of Lamentation,' in *LJT*, pp. 3–10 (4–5).

<sup>36</sup> The phrase is one used by Scholem to describe his own vocation; see Bielik-Robson, 'The Unfallen Silence,' p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Halbertal, '*Eikhah*,' p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 and *passim*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Gershom Scholem, 'On Lament and Lamentation,' in *LJT*, pp. 313–319 (313).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313–317.

<sup>42</sup> Paula Schwebel, 'The Tradition in Ruins,' in *LJT*, pp. 277–301 (292, 296).

<sup>43</sup> Scholem, 'On Lament,' p. 319.

<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Comay, 'Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet,' in *LJT*, pp. 257–275 (257–260).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259; and see Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Hasan-Rokem, 'Bodies Performing in Ruins,' p. 43, p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> Bielik-Robson, 'The Unfallen Silence,' p. 136.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138, p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145–146.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>52</sup> See Adam Lipszyc, 'Words and Corpses: Celan's 'Tenebrae' between Gadamer and Scholem,' in *LJT*, pp. 221–235 (226): 'Lament does not point positively to it [redemption], but the unfallen element of silence, the nothingness of language that lament is always silent about and is able to transmit, preserves the promise of the messianic event.'

<sup>53</sup> *IA*, p. 107.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> '1:3ng,' p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> SxMs109/3/A/1/43/2.

<sup>63</sup> '1:3ng,' p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. S16.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the phrase 'solidarity with the traumatised' with regards to contemporary experi-

mental poetry (and in particular the poetry of Verity Spott), see Keston Sutherland's 12<sup>th</sup> April 2017 lecture at the University of Sussex on 'Affect Storms,' and the Q+A which follows: <<https://vimeo.com/212882683>>.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Luna, J. 2019. Poetry's Law. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 11(1): 16, pp. 1–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.746>

**Published:** 12 August 2019

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