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'A Hostile Environment': Failure of Composition in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn

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This essay examines the effects of incompleteness in Anna Mendelssohn's poetry, when incompleteness constitutes a requirement to take the thought of the poem further, beyond and outside itself, especially in its refusal to be reconciled with reality as it exists. Taking composition to mean the integration of the materials of a poem into a whole, the argument seeks to show that Mendelssohn's poems are not-whole, and do not construct a world, but on the contrary carry through an unappeasable criticism of the reality she lived, which is that of late twentieth-century Britain. Her work is in unremitting rebellion against language that covers over and permits misogyny, racism, class oppression, hatred of art, insipid living. She writes from a situation in which not-speaking is imposed, in which the speech organs themselves have been damaged and closed up. This condition carries a removal of the self from life, into a place of death. Another, contrary death, however, takes place in her poetry: that of the self that passes through a disintegration, which Mendelssohn places at the heart of ecstatic experience of life. She excoriates those who want to remove the extreme aliveness of lyrical language from life and poetry. The law is what gives permission to that suppression: her poetry repeatedly moves against the actions of the law as it deadens life and language. Mendelssohn's poetry is an account, implacable and without resentment, of a life lived inside and against personal and historical suffering.



A number of Anna Mendelssohn's poems present a manifest failure of composition and all of them pass through the possibility of such a failure. Only if we read that failure as necessary do we arrive at the critique of reality that the poems contain. In the commentary that follows, the approach is mainly to read the poems transversely, not as independent wholes but across from one to another, since predominantly they are not in themselves whole. All the texts belong to *Implacable Art*,¹ which represents only a small part of Mendelssohn's poetry,² but has the merit of being a selection that she herself made.

What's meant here by failure of composition is a situation of writing, where the relation of the parts to the whole is such that there's always an incompleteness, in the sense of something unfinished, a thing that can't be resolved but only included in further thinking and further movement that take one out of the poem. This movement is produced both through the absence of some element that's needed and through the excrescence of things that don't fit. What this means in practice will be clarified in the commentaries that follow. As an initial description, it can be said that in Mendelssohn's poems there is a non-integration of experience that goes beyond any modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, because it relates to a suppression of the possibility true speaking, which at its deepest level is connected with a different, death-like fragmentation. This is distinct from the death administered by the ruling order, inside which Mendelssohn experiences being 'left for dead' (p. 10).

We will start by considering how to read the poems where composition in the usual sense is most absent; this will necessitate entering into the idea of composition as thought. The term 'necessary', when referring to failure, takes us to forces external to the poem, to the relation of the poems with the social and historical outside. But, since Mendelssohn's poetry refuses normative orders of representation, that relation is not simple; it will not be possible to penetrate inside it without some painstaking reading of the poems' multiple contrariness, their simultaneous deployment of different directions of sense. The poems don't allow their materials to be placed inside normal spatial logic, a fact that indicates their work of resistance. Resistance here means resistance to impositions of identity and to a reality that not only oppresses the self but at certain moments does not allow it to exist. It also means the refusal and exposure of language that produces these forms of violence but which denies, covers up, its own operation in doing so. Mendelssohn's work forces a particular form of denial to manifest itself: where the law not only condemns the content of something said, but does not allow the person to express what they need to express, by ruling that that speaking itself is out of order. This is a denial that belongs to a situation where speaking the truth has been ruled out.

But first, to give the notion of composition its fullest objective sense, we should consider a poem that presents an urban, social space. The poem begins with the

declarative phrase, 'Concentration camp styles, along mill road, 1998' (p. 80). There is no interpretative account of why the expression 'concentration camp' is necessary. The poem is not presenting a 'scene', since there is no viewpoint – narrative, perspectival, or other – of a subject who can gather together what's seen into a mode of knowledge. The only indication of a social coherence or synthesis that can place all that's 'there' in a set of relations is the word 'styles'. This does not mean that there's no relation between the objects in the poem, but that the outside creates that relation, whose consistency, the first line proposes, can only be thought through some property of a concentration camp. At the same time, there's an implicit but devastating challenge to the way cultural studies, with its valorization of styles, has made comforting sense of urban environments by abandoning critical intelligence.

In several other poems, Mendelssohn speaks of the universe of concentration camps as a part of her history which continues into the present. She does not allow her detestation to stop at 'conformism', which is not its measure:

I also wish to refer to my loathing of conformism
& levelling, of nothing in other words.
nothing apart from the grim grisly grey
'night and fog' existence which climbed &
pulled my own life (p. 102)

Here she cites Alain Resnais' 1956 film, 'Night and Fog', which documents the history of Nazi death camps. Another poem, which we will come to later, expresses with bitterness the violence of everyday antisemitism in England, where 'Jews are shown the way down' (p. 97).

But there is no direct relation between antisemitism and the 'Concentration camp styles' poem. The objects of the poem make sense as 'styles', but there are two exceptions which cannot be subsumed into that category:

a very old lady, back bent permanently forward–
arthritic, –walks, pauses, takes a few steps,
her walking stick. prices flutter on bicycles'
handlebars [...] old man crippled
with arthritis cannot look at the sky. (p. 80)

Two details, especially, exceed the crass landscape of styles: 'her walking stick', and 'cannot look at the sky'. These things can't be integrated, because the suffering they carry is unappeasable, which is one of the meanings of the word 'implacable' of Mendelssohn's title for her book; with a stab of empathy these details interrupt the

composition of a landscape of happily coexisting individualities, whose relation to each other is exposed in the display of ‘prices’.

The first phrase of the poem, separated from what follows by a comma, would seem strident if read as forcing a judgment that the poem does not justify, but that would be an inaccurate sense of its tone, which is simply that of indicating something evident, something that doesn’t need argument. What’s seen by the poem could be summed up as the subsumption of life by a particular, historical order of the senses, in which money is a dominant signifier, and for the sake of which certain categories of human beings are excluded. The invisibilising of the aged and the disabled in British society is part of this order. That this in turn relates to biopolitics and biopolitics to the space of the concentration camp is not stated by the poem, but is a consequence of the thought it sets in motion.³

Another poem jumps rapidly between objective and subjective placement of its objects: composition corresponds to both domains. The rapidity of the shifts brings into appearance a violent cut in both realms: both are rent, and the split crosses from one to the other.

a cloying place	scarred for life	quilted walls	
a nervous alphabet	it isn’t coping	sick buckets	
touching thorns	with the fourth dimension	vietnam	(p. 74)

It’s not so much that the multiple possible pathways of reading don’t add up: one can easily put together a composite set of ‘sensations’. But where is one placing oneself if one does that? Surely in a world, a regime of appearance whose life has been smoothed and reduced? The point is that the pathways cut across each other in such a way as to erase any livable space; no synthesis is possible. The mention of Vietnam leads one to think of a condition of war, which produces psychic and technological hell.

The ‘Concentration camp styles’ poem might seem to be similar to the radical desolation of Tom Leonard’s *Nora’s Place*, as for instance where Leonard writes, ‘people not actually present / from this wall to this wall’, yet there’s a difference in the fact that, for all its desolation, Leonard’s poem depends on the consistency of a voice.⁴ The space presented in Mendelssohn’s poem does not depend on a speaking subject who communicates what they observe but on what adjustment to a particular form of the social looks like. A particular geographical place keeps the details of reality inside an appearance of shining, self-sufficient meaning, while hiding the fact that the meaning it endows them with removes them from life, with the exception of two old persons and, the final phrase, ‘a Greek couple with a mother,’ an ending that provokes further thought.

The consistency created by the category 'styles', does not operate at the level of voice/sensibility, but rests upon individuality in the form of selfish individualism as its envelope of transcendence, to produce what is an execrable social synthesis. Blake, in *Jerusalem*, voices the necessity of protecting 'minute particulars' from

Swelld & bloated General Forms, repugnant to the Divine-
 Humanity, who is the Only General and Universal Form
 To which all Lineaments tend & seek with love & sympathy
 All broad & general principles belong to benevolence
 Who protects minute particulars⁵

But for Blake enunciation of the truth that resides in particulars requires a transcendent agency that relates objects together, something which Mendelssohn refuses. There are no universals in her poem. But she is not a nominalist: material things are there in their density because there is a thinking, beyond their immediate appearance, of their contrary relations. They are held, in arrested movement, by orders of time and space, given as 'concentration camp' and 'mill road', which, negatively, make sense of them.

Mendelssohn's assemblage of materials does not result in a whole, an integration of elements, but in a painful, jarring surplus, a stopping of thought—which is an urge to further, difficult thought. What's produced is a not-whole, which can be grasped as an incompleteness that draws attention to itself and thereby assumes its own necessity. Her method is not the same as the style of montage which has become fashionable in the same degree that modernism has become conservative, where what's in operation is indeterminate inclusion, a method that can't fail because it ends up being mimetic of reality.

The poem 'To a Writer' enters deeply into the excess that brings about incompleteness. Read as a whole, it shows the inner process of Mendelssohn's thought. The first stanza presents forms of expression and perception that have been rendered rigid and static: words are 'sealed', a visual scene has become 'unlicked dry lipped' (p. 83). This has occurred 'in the company of' those who 'suspect law to be shadowed script'. As frequently happens in Mendelssohn's poems, objects and predicates exist in intersecting movement: carved inscription, a classical form of legal proclamation, effectuates the law, and the law produces the authority of writing, as when inscription on stone is mimicked in type font, like Times New Roman. The way authoritarian power, with the shadow it makes, produces a two-way relation between visibility and language is summed up with a phrase that carries the gaze of judges: 'violet brows who cut false reliefs'.

The second stanza begins with the phrase, 'But I forget how ugly I am'. It gives a jolt which skews the poem away from the border of abstract thought. The phrase that follows, 'am reminded by violence | refusing me beauty,' does not allow a static thinking of ugliness and beauty as an abstract either/or which would drain perception. Instead, the jolt carries through to a particular experience of language, in which 'the cool words that flowed in the peace of childhood' were shut down by 'the guardians of inexpressivity'. Mendelssohn does not idealise these 'cool words'; she places them inside a particular layer of middle-class life ('our bohemian paths') and makes them part of a series of contraries that don't collapse into generality. But there is within them a principal antagonism: the child's experience of 'the guardians of inexpressivity', who shut down sensorial fullness of language; the term guardians refers to the 'guardians' of Plato's *Republic*, under whose authority there is to be legislative censoring of poetry.

The third stanza enters further into what's at stake:

Have the words been definitively removed
 That once my mouth greeted each dawn steadily
 Attending slow reawakenings that could not be heard
 When death was not being offered as dismemberment
 In the shocking surfeit of continual appetite
 That my arm snapped against the wall I hid my head
 and hit it liberally against the unforgiving stone (p. 83)

The first two lines take to an extreme something that happens frequently in Mendelssohn's poetry: what at first seems to be the content of something said becomes the act itself of saying it. So that, in one direction, what has been 'removed' (as content) are 'the words [...] that once my mouth greeted', i.e. those particular words, or that type of expression, have been expunged. But in an opposing movement, the act itself of speaking, occurring in the 'temporal now of the poem', has been 'removed'.⁶ The saying of the words that pass in front of us breaks through the law's refusal of permission; this act permits something else to enter the senses.

What's at stake is the language of poetry, and Mendelssohn places her question about expression at a deeper level than the organisation of the self that the law conceives of. In the movement of 'slow reawakenings', from sleep to consciousness, something, which 'could not be heard | When death was not being offered as dismemberment', comes into being. The double negative carries the pressure of syntax in the will to keep the smoothly joined-up self undisturbed; this is the furthest reach of the language of the law. Pushing against that pressure permits something disallowed to break the surface: 'the

shocking surfeit of continual appetite', which causes the body to become disassembled into parts ('my arm [...] my head'). Is this zone of ecstatic dismemberment the one which for Hegel is the process of real thought?⁷ But for Hegel there's a subsequent conceptual synthesis, a reconciliation of subject and world, and for Mendelssohn there's no such thing. The dismemberment that is a type of death can be thought of as consubstantial with the non-processed material of pre-logical apprehension, where synthesis or mastery has not been carried out.⁸ For Mendelssohn, who rejects mastery, there's no reconciliation: 'I hid my head | and hit it liberally against the unforgiving stone'. What's being described can be thought of as a site of trauma, or as an instance of psychosis, where there's complete absence of the law which assigns persons and things to their proper, stable places in the world.⁹ In either of those instances, a self that has come through a radical shaking of the boundaries of itself will not be satisfied with any smoothed-over version of life; it will be unappeasable, a meaning one can find in the word 'implacable'.

A lot is at stake in the minute articulations of the poem. The body hits itself 'against the unforgiving stone', a phrase whose dull iambs convey a tone of acceptance of regulated reality; it's a phrase which could have been written by one of the Movement poets. To refuse, in the smallest turns of language, to submit to the removal of the history of the person and of the collectivity, is to keep time open, at the cost of considerable pain. Mendelssohn's writing does not imagine a time of restitution; but it rejects the prolongation of the present in guilt, resentment or revenge.¹⁰ That is a major part of its politics.

Against the removal of poetry from life, the final stanza celebrates language capable of holding the surfeit of the senses inside images, and these inside a cosmos ('fields close shorn by heavens full blue'). The language is Keatsian, citing a historically previous aesthetic. But this sensual fullness is preemptorily truncated by 'guilt', which causes the person to be 'clamped into self denial', with its offer of false resolution, and that phrase brings back into the poem the powers of the language of the law. But there is no self-regarding pathos: that would be the plea of self-denial, resulting in suppression of 'rumours of a life being lived'. Instead of authority which shines with 'false reliefs', what's called into visibility, finally, is 'the stamp of a face', the speaking subject and shape of Mendelssohn's life.

Mendelssohn's decision is for a particular modality of the autobiographical 'I'. The I-expression carries sedimented inside it the history of composition in modern poetry. The fact that Mendelssohn's work appears to reprise certain well-known modernist techniques such as fragmentation and parataxis, does not necessarily place her inside a modernist tradition. If we bring into our reading of Mendelssohn Gertrude Stein's

idea of composition and her writing in *Tender Buttons*, we can cut through certain false assumptions. Here are some sentences from Stein's 'Composition as Explanation':

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition [...] Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.¹¹

Insofar as it abandons preconception, the proposition is radical. It stresses the aliveness of the seen and its arising within a collectivity, democratically, without hierarchy. But it also invokes, beyond the temporal difference of generations, a social harmony. It is not socially or politically radical, except in a conservative sense, because it does not conceive that 'everybody' and 'everything' are split by social antagonism, i.e. that not everybody is doing and thus seeing the same thing. Steinian composition is not politically emancipatory. In *Tender Buttons*, objects are released from normative spatial ordering and interpenetrate in a cubist mode. They interpenetrate without obstruction, as in John Cage's non-dualist proposition: 'each thing and each human being is seen at the centre'.¹² In Mendelssohn's poetry people and objects do obstruct each other, in space and in speech, a fact that relates to a society divided by class and race-thinking. Stein rejects the notion of a whole that depends upon the subordination of parts, but the way in which each word can be the expressive centre of the sentence moves her writing in the direction of reconciliation. In Mendelssohn, there's no such reconciled space; things and people do obstruct each other and this obstructs communication; speech obstructs speaking. Where Stein and Mendelssohn meet is in the release of objects from interpretative power; where they differ is in Mendelssohn's unremitting refusal of reconciliation.

The work of the force that stops speech at the mouth, that shuts mouths, manifests itself in a poem that begins:

agents are sent to shut mouths
whilst marriages and revolutions
prosper (p. 97)

This poem repeatedly passes through a prohibition of speech, a closure at the lips. The question is not so much who such an act benefits—the answer is obvious—but how it does its work, how a dominant order is preserved, what its agents do. 'Marriages

and revolutions' here belong to an order instituted at the level of the state, covered by ideology, manifest where the threat of punishment is combined with a mythicized maleness: 'warnings are issued | & husbands valour braved'. The normative meaning of male heroism reverses into another which is saturated with social violence: husbands are valour *braved*, i.e. suffered by women, made brave by that suffering, a pompous fetishism. If such violence is near enough generic to the nation state, a more specific historical situation is cited in the lines that follow:

& reputations forever remain undimmed,
 in the world of the eternally saved.
 whilst jews are shown the way down
 the tubes over England resound
 with squeezed to a pulp
 of juice after juice

'Jews', 'tubes', 'juice', 'juice': the degraded sounds, following a movement announced in 'down [...] resound', carry the twisted mouth of heritage speech founded upon ethno-nationalism, twisted in that it can't say the truth except through hiding in homophones its hatred, its real enjoyment (jouissance) of making Jews into juice. The rhymes, instead of making a suture that creates continuity of sense, produce a jangle that exudes hatred.

The first section of the poem breaks off in mid-sentence: 'and the agents of valorous', followed by a gap, after which we read 'and the agent in white | abonnements'. The gap holds the non-expressed of the discourse of racist nationhood: the connection between money, maleness, whiteness and time – 'abonnements' being subscriptions, most commonly an expression for season tickets, but also containing 'bonnement', honestly; and 'bonne', a female servant. The words as they untwist indicate some of the larger trajectory of Mendelssohn's struggle against the unsaid.

The final section points up how they, the dominant, hide their agency through a particular use of language:

they are hiding something
 that is what a cover up does.
 it hides something.
 then because they are clever
 they turn the object into the subject.
 the mat is not the cat.
 and neither does it sit on that.

‘They are hiding something’ – violence against Jewish people. But this is not a simple act of denial. It’s reality itself and the language that composes it that constitutes ‘what a cover up does’, and the poem makes a rip in that order, causing the sound of the suppressed truth to be heard. The actions of the dominant hide themselves inside a twisting, hide what they do inside objects, which are what existing reality appears to consist of. One could claim that this critique of language corresponds with what Marx writes about commodities in *Capital*. But, though ‘defining every object as a subject’ is an accurate statement of what philosophical idealism does, the poem does not cite ‘theory’: it has the directness of a lesson for, say, thirteen-year-olds, an entirely demotic pedagogy, truly conceptual at the same time.¹³ By uncovering the violence that sustains normative reality, the poem subverts the language which makes homophonic repetition (cat/sat/mat) into odour-free currency of equivalence. That disruption can’t be carried through without disallowing the law that regulates the language of poetry itself. Suspension of the law, of society and of poetry, is not simply a matter of interruption, a term frequently used to describe the limits of what poetry that engages in resistance can do.

The poem, ‘poetry is the lack...’, breaks the smooth surface of reconciled reality, causing it to be manifest as a ‘suture’, put in place by a law of visual appearance:

poetry is the lack the suture highly conscious in a woman,
representing the physique, visual sense in a metamorphosed,
metaphored subject who is defined by place. (p. 24)

To paraphrase, poetry ‘is’ that metamorphosis which sutures, smoothly joins, the physical body to image, where image is located in the social place of a woman. Major consequences radiate from that point: not simply how social oppression has become sedimented in the history of poetry but, contrarily, how a life can be lived, how poetry can be the measure of a life. The text, which is set out as prose, continues with a reiteration:

i have nothing to say. poetry is the lack the suture
highly conscious of skirting round the subject a man’s pursuit a
child’s also children battle with their mothers’ skirts playing hide
and seek this is not suspect behavior. a mother writes this. it is the
magic and the mystery of her womb.

Regulated and sutured ‘visual sense’ is re-stated in the metaphor ‘skirting round the subject’. While ‘suture’ and ‘womb’ make a condensed reference to French feminist

theory of the 1960s and 1970s (Kristeva; Cixous), the utterance ‘a mother writes this’ is singular, not theoretical.

After the apparent assertion of confidence in theoretical discourse, there has been an abrupt turn: it states ‘i have nothing to say’. A second voice has come in.¹⁴ It enters again after the second stretch of theoretical language and says ‘there is a present sense. there is an awareness of the devastating slip from plain reality to metaphysical angst’. The poem speaks here of its own movement which is towards ‘plain reality’, in other words towards empirical reality which in art cannot be totalised; terrain of the ‘Concentration camp styles’ poem. Yet there’s still a pull towards something else, which Mendelssohn names as ‘beauty’. But she is also wary of it: ‘it is tempting to fit beauty, to express beauty, to express it without mockery without resonating Alice’s SOUP’. ‘Beauty’ names a completion of the empirical world, but in Mendelssohn’s work there’s no schema of sublimation, only an uncompleted desire for transformation, which flashes up in passages of lyrical language that resemble Keats and also Hopkins.

At this point and in quick succession the poem makes two more of those sudden turns which are typical of Mendelssohn’s poetry. First, there’s ‘unless, totally mad, the sound of a street’, which speaks of an unattenuated invasion of the senses by raw reality, a kind of madness, because the filter which protects the self from too much reality is removed. Nevertheless this is a removal which, as Walter Benjamin shows in his work on Baudelaire, can open the person to experience in an epoch in which the capacity for experience has been numbed by information and entertainment. And then, even more abruptly, in a dizzy movement, we jump to a new paragraph: ‘street | ’s name [...] conjures false familiarity’. This break, which is also a suture, constitutes, since it’s a caesura, inappropriate to the prose form of the poem, the entry of a completely different world of random particularities. The switch from ‘madness’ to ‘false familiarity’, which recalls the ‘devastating slip’ into metaphysics referred to above, places disjunctive worlds beside each other while also finding their disturbing complicity.

‘Familiarity’ is placed in association with ‘cinema vérité’, a particular technique of production, related formally to realism (or neo-realism), a creation of consistency which the poem quite quickly destroys as it enters a terrain of random associations of sound. But the ‘I’ is not willing to slip into an atmosphere of madness, a word which here has changed its meaning to refer to a theatre of fatuous intensities and stupid laughter (‘Schubert’s in the last shoe’ – where the delayed homophone of ‘last’ as shaping mold in cobbling increases the silliness) which may be read as the reduction of art to entertainment: ‘i don’t go ga-ga. don’t be mad’. Puns reveal a weakness of thought by short-circuiting it, but also constitute a vector of what’s said sideways and repressed, here the desire to destroy art.

The text embodies a shortcoming of those consistency-making stances (theory, beauty, realism) as they cover up what they do; and also a shortcoming of madness, which might replace consistency, to hold against cynicism, the main filter against experience since the 1990s, one of whose forms is abandonment of critical intelligence and adjustment to art as entertainment. The refusal of madness has passed through madness; the 'false familiarity' that makes a world is stripped away, the self and poetry having passed through the abyss of dissociation.

Mendelssohn's critical rejection of poetry as a 'suture' has consequences for her choice of technical means. We can arrive at her refusals fairly straightforwardly: along with metaphorisation and realism, still the two main means by which conventional poetry places itself in the world, there's a more complex refusal of modernism. In this, Mendelssohn anticipates the fact that modernism has, since around the turn of the century, become a conservative field of academic study and a set of co-opted techniques for writing. But beyond this stance and at a deeper level, Mendelssohn writes with severe unease towards any language that claims a reconciled world. Her poetry is rebarbative at the level of sheer placement of words inside syntax, for example in her irregular use of stops and capital letters. The uncertainty about the beginning and ending of sentences, the dizzy caesuras, the pre-semantic, visceral sounds, are entirely intertwined with a critique of social relations. As technical means, they destroy that operation of syntax by which it lays things side by side to make a world.

'[W]rap yourself in jam jeunesse' (p. 50), with its open-mouthed *a* sounds that mimic compulsive enjoyment, is the first line of a poem that moves to expression of disgust at the 'veneering' carried out by bourgeois consciousness in its fantasy of social harmony and its tricks of liberal conscience: 'it must be breathtaking to be | unconfined & universally progressive'. This is immediately followed by 'boiled beneath the labour at Mauthausen | our blood'. There's no transitional material; the motion of the syntax takes us straight from 'unconfined' to what was done to bodies in the Nazi slave-labour camp. The will to truth that moves from the hedonistic superego, to social harmony, to a concentration camp, i.e. from enjoyment to liberal fantasy to fascism, forces open connections that have been suppressed.

The sounds of 'jam jeunesse' embody the silliness of *jouissance* at work in a command to hedonism. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, the obligation to *jouissance* is a contemporary form of the social superego.¹⁵ That that pressure should be embodied as sound in language critically exposes vectors of visceral intensity.¹⁶ The truth that the final part of the poem speaks is that, despite the denials which public language emits,

death by labour (the message of Mauthausen) persists in present time at the level of bodies:

boiled beneath the labour at Mauthausen
 our blood has travelled our line
 in quarters where the icy stems
 poison the vats in the dictats
 intoning never again will it be (p. 50)

The words 'never again' have recurred a number of times in the language of commissions appointed to report on post-holocaust genocide. In the poem, this phrase goes in radically different directions, depending on where it is spoken from. In ethical terms it expresses what absolutely should not be permitted to recur. Yet the very same phrase constitutes a cover for the fact that the same underlying conditions continue to exist. This particular form of lying, which hides inside moral and legal language, is something that Mendelssohn repeatedly exposes.

'Never again' has become a statement that's intoned, recited. And a nasty rhyme ('vats [...] dictats') exposes jouissance of the sound of words as vehicle of a horror that is still happening in spite of the pious 'never again'. Mendelssohn's rejection of the kind of linguistic pleasure that covers over fascist desire removes the ground of any appeased relation with history, takes away the seductiveness of that position.

The move from pleasure of sound to sound as pain, via the effect of time inside words, is crucial to a poem which has 'zinzolin' as its title. The word refers to the dark red of traditional vestments, a condensation of a world lost, belonging to family history. Elsewhere Mendelssohn writes, 'Polish Russian | relations have had a painful history. I was in the pain of that history. | And I knew it to the last fibre of my body and soul' (p. 78). 'zinzolin' exposes detritus of speech and writing, together with its correlate, the waste that falls out of the realm of clear definition, a function of language that the poem refuses.

of barely seen, hardly noticed, my ideal, pledge visit utterings
 in the way, obstruse, half hung arm loose, spun, pun.
 to not see, have angst fall in unwanted, interruptive.
 Wasted expanse. unregistered, the cadavre no one wants. (p. 98)

We find ourselves among material, non 'ideal', objects that anxiety lives inside. The subject of this anxiety is a person and a body, one of whose limbs has been violently

disarticulated, as its hidden being in language is disarticulated from wholeness by lines of twisting force.¹⁷ This is a person who ‘no one wants’, who has been expelled and turned into a dead object. The poem registers anxiety but wrests the objects of anxiety out of stasis, as in the lines that force together words unmediated by syntax: ‘walk. be grateful. & detest any who would drive you | amiss. experience. horror. ape. speed.’ Mendelssohn refuses to allow the words to work grammatically as an order (experience horror, ape speed), which would be a relief, since it would place the subject inside a certain containment, coercive but nevertheless a containment, a place. Instead, the poem puts one inside the dense, unboundaried, inertia of anxiety, its depriving the subject of a shape, while in the selfsame moment of reading, via an excruciating contradiction, the words also want to explode into movement.

The poem’s strong life–energy expresses itself in a struggle against definitions and hierarchical, rigidly disciplined spaces such as ‘grammar’, described as ‘pyramidal’, related to school with its unremitting fixity of time: ‘this grammar, pyramidal, finishing whipped stiff | schools turn, timetable, 9.00 a.m. 12. 5.00 p.m. 6’. What’s annihilated by those frames is time:

people hear
and cannot see the space within which spoken words
are written, cannot see time, cannot know time.

That place that has real time inside it is described in another poem as one where ‘words pit | each others skins’ (p. 30), instead of being smoothly subsumed into orders of exclusion and denial. The acoustic and the visual are placed in close interchange once language is taken as making a space where duration is inscribed and lived. As words move back towards life, there’s no wholeness, there’s excess and overflow, in which thought moves.

Inside the duration of words there is also a larger, historical temporality. It can be heard in the condensed form of a genocidal curse:

what wouldn’t I choose, the one who could have nothing.
who had to go to hell to save her father from the
Echoes of a curse that had sent him, the curse
Thundering. (p. 98)

Mendelssohn here asserts her life and her poetry as living in a historical prohibition on happiness, but she also curses the curse: ‘Go to Hell. Get Lost. Clear Out. Off with You.’

If we place 'zinzolin' and 'Concentration camp styles' beside each other, we can find how their opposite movements interpenetrate. 'zinzolin' wrests the objects of anxiety out of subjective fixity and places them inside a life that's subject to a historical curse. 'Concentration camp styles' enumerates a social reality whose deadness produces anxiety. At the same time it completes its movement by making apparent, precisely in the form of non-expression, the historical force behind immediate reality, indicated in the first three words that serve as its title.

Perhaps the deepest contradiction at work in the poetry is that the world as constructed by dominant power provokes disgust, outrage, and pain and yet the intelligence of poetry refuses that world without being able to imagine its destruction and even less name an alternative. But it would be more accurate to say, the poems choose not to imagine that destruction, since doing so would dissolve the real texture of denial against which the life of the poems wants to exist. Hence there's a mental state characterized by an extreme tension of non-resolution, accompanied by a refusal to abandon, even in the movements of its incompleteness, the act of poetic composition which in turn increases that tension. Mendelssohn's rejection of false objects of desire and of alibis of all kinds removes the ground of any appeased relation with reality, takes away the seductiveness of that position.

Alongside the negatives that make a stumbling-block to constructing a world in poetry, there's the refusal to abandon the lyric voice, its tangling of sound and thought in time: against the shutting down of speaking, writing makes an auditory passage which moves through physical and social space. That voice breaks through the affective and syntactic bonds that hold the world in place. The work of poetic energy and intelligence makes a pathway through despair, without eluding the reasons for despair. 'To have life taken twice that is terrible, | one's life. to be left without a life. left for dead. | to not want a sound, a particular sound' (p. 10). Mendelssohn makes loss of desire, the point where despair takes hold, manifest as sound, lived body of words, and thereby turns the loss against itself. The poem excoriates the lifelessness of a friend who she dances with and finds to be 'a rigid corpse of a living creature', words that repeat twice.

The poems refuse the condition of not-speaking in the act of stating it: 'It might as well have been a life. | so vibrant. trembling on my lips that were torn away' (p. 11). The first sentence approaches a tone of cynical resignation, but that tone is immediately turned round by a pulse of alive speech. Not-speaking is Mendelssohn's relation with others in a poem titled 'friday': 'Has anyone spoken to me today?' That is the poem's first phrase. What follows touches the limit of despair: 'product of fears and phobias. | Who transcends immortality by killing herself before remembering | how much she loved the earth this life' (p. 31). What's at stake is not the senses; suicide does not figure

here as the termination of sentient life, but as the abandonment of a different kind of continuance. She gives it the word 'immortality', which is less a theological support, as the idea of the soul would be, than a word for continuance after death. What does it mean to 'transcend' that? This moment of the poem is strange, yet it's not foreign to the rest of her work. To transcend the continuity of a life is to make a hole, or find an abyss in something that approximates to continuance of being in language. Only after passing through that species of death does she come to 'how much she loved the earth this life'. A deeper change than what is usually meant by interrupting the law, with its sense of a temporary lifting, is at stake.

'Really the law should not encroach | Upon poetry'. The law in question speaks in a scenario of baking, in 'friday', as culinary visibility and desire is reduced to consuming: a cake-shop allegory of art reduced to taste. Baking is of course historically work of women; Mendelssohn places her own work against what normativity has seen in her: 'detestation | of singularity in the female writer whose possession is a Muse | Invisible apart from approximate complement thrashing the waves'. A degraded myth of the birth of Aphrodite marks the literary fetishes of a place that 'declares itself unbeatable, [...] rises higher and higher | in an oven of city proportions' perfect bake'; the poem forces its way through this degraded transcendence, unmakes the myth, the ideology, inside these expectations and the merely culinary seduction they actually desire ('uniform cakes | to standard book size, coated in pink, peach, chocolate, toffee | And occasionally peppermint green').

The poem speaks, in its final lines, to damage, to violence done to speaking: 'the throat is ironed and cut down to size from the mountains | from the hills that dare to stretch a desire to walk in fresh air'. What Mendelssohn does not want is the law that prescribes poetry as memory, as myth, as consumable culinary perfection, as diminishment of desire, as 'gradgrind rectification' which causes literature to be 'lost': all of these.

'Naturalia' pursues the question of what force is operating in the reduction of art to consumption. Once again the destructive force centres on the speech organs: 'I do not wish my tongue to be chopped into tiny little pores, each one made to star: HOTEL' (p. 133). There is repeated emphasis, through reference and through sound, on the relation between speech and the body. To equate violence to the speech organs with reduction of speech to passive reproduction of the fetish word, is to allow no quarter to inadequate social-democratic ideas of language as communication: the damage inside the word, the mouth, and the consumer good is a connected whole. This is the starting-point for Mendelssohn's poem, and the political is already there. Its real register is excluded from what 'writing is supposed to be': 'there simply is no idea of | the nature of the (shut up) relationship (oh christ) with a heap of rough husbands'.

When Mendelssohn writes, in a poem that is perhaps the fullest statement of her poiesis,

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 (p. 43)

she issues a terrible warning against despair. She refuses death as a means of exit and gives no quarter to abandonment of her own history. Her use of the word 'assimilationists' cites abandonment of cultural difference, especially by Jews, and equates crass 'popular' poetry as its counterpart.

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 the intangible
 particularly, not the loud fish & chip poems
 were for the assimilationists, now also

Her father pointed out that 'prison had had a terrible effect on her, making it impossible for her to concentrate'.¹⁸ The work, therefore, of poetry takes place to unmake the violence of prison, that concentrate of law-preserving violence. It requires a binding oath of fidelity, between the mind and what does not submit to the time of the law, here named as the soul, the intangible.

Mendelssohn's poetry acknowledges the effect of not-speaking, which is to unhinge. This is difficult to grasp because non-speaking is always being pulled back into thinking shaped by law, i.e. interpreted as a content that is not permitted to be expressed. This failure to criticise the violence that makes speaking into a subject of permission, falls once again into the social-democratic understanding of communication. The not-speaking that occurs in Mendelssohn's poems belongs somewhere else, to a situation where 'I' do not exist, or else exist as other to myself, as a dead other. This is not something that can be known in the same way that what's forbidden can be known. The language of forbidding acknowledges what's forbidden and this is the logic of repression. When the mouth is forcibly shut, a void comes into being, a hole in communication. If saying disappears, not-saying also disappears: what a person 'needs to say' has exited the universe of discourse. Mendelssohn's poems require of a reader that s/he pass through this death-like void, and not let its existence continue to be obscured.

Notes

- ¹ Anna Mendelssohn, *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Folio and Equipage, 2000). Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in this edition.
- ² Professor Sara Crangle's edition of Mendelssohn's collected poetry has recently been published as *I'm Working Here: The Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2020).
- ³ Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), shows that the exclusion of surplus humanity from the social is the threshold at which biopolitics becomes thanatopolitics, and that the space the latter produces has the concentration camp as its ultimate logic. Part Three, Chapter 7, 'The Camp as "Nomos" of the Modern', is especially relevant.
- ⁴ Tom Leonard, *Nora's Place in Reports From the Present: Selected Work 1982–94* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 118.
- ⁵ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 43/38, in *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York and London: Norton, 2008), p. 264.
- ⁶ 'The temporal now of the poem' cites Aodan McCardle's PhD thesis, 'Action as Articulation of the Contemporary Poem' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2016).
- ⁷ Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 27.
- ⁸ See Theodor Adorno's critique of synthesis in *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 29–31.
- ⁹ Lacan speaks of the experience of psychosis as one where there's an absence of 'something absolutely nondeceptive,' which in Descartes took the form of 'God as incapable of deceiving us.' See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book III: The Psychoses* (New York and London: Norton, 1993), pp. 64–65.
- ¹⁰ Some of the thinking here derives from a piece of writing by Jacob Bard-Rosenberg, Facebook post, 14 November 2017, 4.25 am.
- ¹¹ Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69481/composition-as-explanation>> [accessed 20 September 2017].
- ¹² John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 46.
- ¹³ Foreword by Rolf Tiedemann, in Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. xiii.
- ¹⁴ I am grateful to Helen Dimos for this observation.
- ¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 237.
- ¹⁶ See Eleni Stecopoulos, *Visceral Poetics* (Oakland, CA: ON Contemporary Practice, 2016).
- ¹⁷ 'Obstruse' is according to the OED a probable variant of *abstruse*, whose older meaning is hidden, secret.
- ¹⁸ Wikipedia entry on Anna Mendelssohn, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Mendelssohn> [accessed 29 November 2017].

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

