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THE AGONIES OF AMBIVALENCE: ANNA MENDELSSOHN, *LA POÉTESSE MAUDITE*

SARA CRANGLE

I

I am become my enemy whom I could not please
and am imagined to be whom I am not
for she was not me although her interpretations
suited her best should I have no where to lean my face
except against the cup of the palm of this hand
that hides the life I could not live
having fallen young into my mind
having fallen further than answers would give
an astute reply to martial arms
had I words I could confidently write
& not be told that they were an excuse
I might find the time to warm into less fright.

I try to confine my expansive capacity
and am told that I am not known for my hospitality.

—Grace Lake, *Tondo Aquatique* (1997)

Grace Lake's sonnet paints an introspective Icarian fall, a plunge well beyond the public parameters of mere bathos. Insistent against longstanding enfeeblement, this self declaims: "I am become." Individuality retraces its capacities for cohering and steering, testing the plausibility of the person called "I." The lived subject is pitted against a "she" bound to the endlessness of interpretation.¹ She is a "me" and an exacting, relentless enemy. Unquiet, the "I" cannot incline toward or rest comfortably upon this self. Far from reassured by "the fullness of [her] decline," the speaker dives into a bottomless *ne plus ultra* of suspicion.² The climate of this submersive, anxious region is cold with fear, its fluid boundary menaced and marked by an accusative "you" that is herself as other, and, come the *volta* (if not before), others, full stop. Absent from articulation, the pronoun "you" nevertheless pervades, deploring declarations as mere justifications. That same "you" labels ungenerous attempts to shore up the ruination that this being is become. Embedded, persistent

questions go unanswered, answers do not give, nor do those who seek them.³ What brought this “I” to this descending impasse? Violence? This abyss is “an astute reply to martial arms,” arms that end in a cupped palm, the locus of an unreadable, unrealisable future, haunted by dictates past and present, imagined and painfully real.

But haven’t we been here before, poetically speaking? In 1888, Verlaine asks: “is it not true that *et nunc et semper et in secula* the sincere poet will see himself, will feel himself, will know himself *damned* by the rule of any faction”?⁴ The factions in question can be as small as Lake’s subjective dyad, as when Rimbaud needs “complete protection, even against [him]self” (78). Rimbaud is condemned by his own reticence, his refusal of acknowledgement, his envisaged resistance to inclusion in the coterie of Verlaine’s construction, *les poètes maudits* (60). Defined by the war it wages on binaries, the cursed poets sling paradoxes and oxymorons, revelling in the agonies of ambiguity. Or perhaps not quite. Transcendent poet, abject obscurantist, *le poète maudit* is: “Absolute by imagination, absolute in expression....But cursed!” (12). Is the curse, then, the torturous prophecy of a future marked by contradiction, uncertainty, equivocation?

Torturous or no, assuredly self-fulfilling.

II

Embodied as weakness, vacillation takes about a century to wend its hesitant, dogged way from aesthetic, gendered, “degenerate” performance, to puling David resisting the Goliath of metaphysics, to the deliberately shaky foundation of contemporary ethics, criticism, and theory. *Sotto voce*, weakness announces a crisis of ideology, of putting the “I”—becoming or stagnate, cursed or celebrated—at the centre of thought and action. With this refusal of the ubiquitous, self-important Human comes a refusal of the self-assured human. “We moderns with our anxious care for ourselves and love of our neighbour...appear as a *weak* age,” Nietzsche writes, condemnatory flag at

half-mast. For Nietzsche's weakness refers to the presumptuousness of our values, our continued faith in "scientificity" and philosophical truths, not to mention our smug moral rectitude, the comfort we take in aspiring to "the good" (91).⁵ Nietzsche attributes this unthinking continuity to volitional fatigue and inevitability; the former comprising a *décadence* ascribable to individuals and the *fin-de-siècle* as a whole, the latter part of a trans-historical, inevitable cycle of decline.⁶ Resigned pliancy infuriates Nietzsche, but he identifies as a decadent, as complicit in this very ideological malaise, one crucial to the variations and incongruities of his own philosophy.⁷ "How does one compromise oneself today?" he asks in *Twilight of the Idols*. "By being consistent. By going in a straight line. By being less than ambiguous" (77). It is 1889, and the semantic reversal of weakness is well underway.

As such, Emmanuel Levinas is far from the first philosopher to use weakness as a philosophical metaphor, although he is arguably unique in generating a hermeneutics of radical passivity, a humanism defined by the negation that is a perpetual deferral to otherness.⁸ For Levinas stubbornly refuses to give up the category human, instead reworking its heroic terms. Subjectivity itself is Levinas's accursed share; we are all *maudits*, condemned to the narrow confines of our individual, mortal selves. Be they regretful, anticipatory, or lived, our sufferings are not, for Levinas, "the vicarious but private martyrdom of the beautiful soul" but are rooted in an openness to the incomprehensible Other to whom we are forever obliged, a responsibility Levinas considers pre-originary, exceeding the mandatory, the constitutive (xxxiii-iv).⁹ While the foundation of Levinas's thinking was constructed during his internment in World War II, the essays gathered under the title *Humanism of the Other* are written just before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the May '68 uprisings.¹⁰ In these writings, his once-censorious attitude toward art softens, so that he now speaks freely of art as a guide to contemporary spiritual life.¹¹ And his terms and references are often, rather curiously and persistently, decadent. Levinas envisions ethics as "[t]he swoon of being fainting into humanity" (6), and aligns radical passivity with a willed unhealthiness reminiscent of the "eternal

convalescen[ce]” that defines Baudelaire’s ideal artistic genius.¹² And Levinas directly credits Baudelaire with teaching us “that sensible givens overflow, by their significations, the element where they are supposedly confined” (12). In Rimbaud, Levinas finds more than a self-absorbed *poète maudit*, asking: “Is it certain that Rimbaud’s ‘I is another’ means only alteration, alienation, betrayal of self, strangeness of self, and servitude to that stranger?” (62).¹³ Levinas claims that the statement “I is another” may well encapsulate the humility of the individual who “*puts himself in the other’s place*, that is, accuses himself of the other’s illness or pain” (62). If “I is another,” that other may well be an “enemy whom I could not please.” Regardless, an “expansive capacity” is needed, an infinite hospitality in the face of an always bewildering, possibly antagonistic otherness, no matter what hardship that vulnerability causes the subject.

Aesthetically and philosophically, *Humanism of the Other* is indebted to the nineteenth century. Not only because Levinas identifies the Nietzschean wake in which he trails, rejecting the pursuit or ownership of truth, equating the end of humanism with the death of metaphysics, and insisting, with historically-informed fatigue on show, that “in our time, metaphysics keeps on ending and the end of metaphysics is our metaphysics” (47). But also because Levinas recognises the cumulative exacerbation of the problems that Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche so presciently diagnosed, among them, alienations individual and social. In the previous century, Levinas argues, alienation was believed transitory, even transcendental, a means of “bring[ing] a surplus of consciousness and clarity to the fulfilment of things.” By extension and contrast:

Today’s angst is more profound. It comes from seeing revolutions founder in bureaucracy and repression and totalitarian violence passing for revolution. *Because disalienation itself is alienated in them.* In the revolutionary enterprise led with extreme consciousness that nevertheless undoes the vigilant intention that desires it, in action ripped out of the firm hand—the iron fist—that guides it, fails or at least is denounced the *recurrence to self*, the idea of an ego that is identified in finding itself. The reunion of self and self is a flop. Interiority is not rigorously interior. *I is another.* Is not identity itself a failure? (60)

Eliding direct reference to his source—almost assuredly the “disalienation” of Fanon’s *Peau Noire*, *Masques Blancs* (1952)—Levinas then denounces the associated revolutionary programme of *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), stating unequivocally that it replicates the problem it battles against, a charge he extends to identity politics writ large.¹⁴ These are the sorts of claims that underpin a quiet critical fury about the absoluteness of Levinas’s otherness, an absoluteness that reinforces an agenda of difference that too easily yields to discrimination. Surely post-identity is as ruthless as the post-humanism that Levinas opposes?¹⁵ This difficulty is compounded by Levinas’s refusal of protest at the very moment when civil rights, not to mention liberatory movements of gender and sexuality, are just gaining voice via the vigilant tactics Levinas questions. Like Nietzsche before him, Levinas remains open to the charge of conservatism, of a failure to produce a clear system that results in a systematic failure: his call for a new ethics ironically sustains outdated privilege.

“Is not identity itself a failure?” Levinas’s question is sincerely posed, and is posed, still further, by participants in and direct benefactors of late twentieth-century minority influence.¹⁶ Nietzsche’s engagement with decadence and decline is inextricable from his fears about the homogenisation of an increasingly democratic world, one that might eradicate oppressive social hierarchies, but also risks losing differences creative and intellectual.¹⁷ After the Second World War, Levinas turns to narratives of wilful passivity to combat fears about the obliteration of the humanity of the human, an eradication he perceives in Heidegger, his philosophical precursor, who yielded too entirely to the category “Being” rather than the human beings that very ontology might serve, elucidate, inform. This fear prompts Levinas’s conclusionary return, in *Humanism of the Other*, to the 1968 protesters. He wants to know “if the aspirations of today’s youth, despite the violence and irresponsibility in which these aspirations degenerate, can do without thought devoted to subjectivity defined from responsibility and against the [Heideggerean] notion of being?” (68). With just a hint of Max Nordau on offer, Levinas insists upon the degeneration of this generation, its too-consuming

violence. But admiration tempers condemnation: youth contested the individual conditioned by capitalism, one perceived “as accumulation in being, by honours, titles, professional competence—ontological tumefaction weighting so heavily on others as to crush them, instituting a hierarchical society that maintains itself beyond the necessities of consumption.” At its best, 1968 affirmed a “vulnerability more passive than all passivity,” and our definitional “debt to the other” (76).

Language was central: although admittedly “contesting a world already denounced long ago,” young people gave new life to the clichéd terms of protest. In “certain great moments,” these young people uttered speech that ruptured the everyday, yielded fully to otherness, and deployed the “Nietzschean word, prophetic word.” Aspirational if evanescent, these articulations were “quickly extinguished by a language just as wordy and conformist as the one it was supposed to replace” (69). Refuting triumphalism, disparaging violence, Levinas nevertheless lauds how May ’68 orchestrated an epiphanic vision of humanity briefly lifted from the curse of subjectivity.

III

Then known as Anne Mendleson (later and heretofore, Anna Mendelssohn), Grace Lake was in a car with the American poet Ed Dorn, among others, en route to Paris, at some point in the spring of 1968. Evidence that she entered the boundaries of the French capital remains scant.¹⁸ Mendelssohn was almost twenty: a student midway into a degree in comparative studies at the University of Essex, a fledgling poet, and a political activist.¹⁹ Founded in 1964, Essex quickly became a notoriously radical university, and in the spring of 1968, was shut down by a student protest against a visiting speaker from Porton Down, Britain’s most renowned military research institute.²⁰ Mendelssohn took part in this protest; around this time, she also makes an appearance in Jean-Luc Godard’s documentary on student unrest in England, *British Sounds* (1969).²¹ In 1970, still enrolled at Essex, Mendelssohn moved to London, where she wrote for countercultural periodicals and agitated on

behalf of squatters' rights.²² A discrete, three-page portion of her fragmented and incomplete memoir reflects upon this period. The memoir was written over the course of twenty years; this untitled section was likely written in the late seventies.²³ It is quoted here almost in full.

I thought I had all the answers—that if only everybody else could see then it would be alright. I thought they were wrong and I was right—we were right. The problem is thinking you're right—the world is as it is today because of people thinking they're right and I fell right into that trap—I'm right/you're wrong. Irresistible force meets immovable object... The problem was thinking what's right for myself was right for everyone else, that it would be alright once they change.

I was brought up, like everyone, that certain things are right and certain things are wrong; an ideology, a belief system, a morality, an interpretation of reality. Well that felt all wrong, and I started questioning it, and blaming my misery on the people and the structure trying to make me a certain way. They were providing me with answers, and I questioned those answers, they didn't fit me and I didn't fit them. I was miserable, I saw misery all around me, and I created a new set of answers—only if they change can I be happy, and along with that came a dissection and an analysis of the structure, the misery manufacturing soul destroying State.

I found joy in sharing my questioning with others, giving validity to that questioning, to diving into unmapped, untrodden territory. We lost our way many times—in a world full of answers it's hard to hold a question, when all you know is what feels wrong. Friendships suffered, we all expected of ourselves and each other to have the answer, and we fell into despair and mistrust. The joy turned sour. There was no nourishment for us in the world we were born to, and the initial fuel we had found in each other was burning out. It was a lonely time. And I blamed the State for our alienation—though by that time I was numb from the harm we do to each other.²⁴

It hit me that our political activities arose out of despair—that I never really believed that the revolution was possible anyway, let alone inevitable. Everything out there was all too big, too complicated, to take on; too anarchic to make any logical sense of. I'd slowly progressed from world politics to city (London) politics to local politics, till finally I was left with the smallest unit—myself.²⁵

And without a sense of humour what can be done?

Humour is a question that remains live in Mendelssohn's writing and thinking, a cogent means of addressing the absurdities and extremities of human endeavour in general, and revolutionary protest in particular. In this piece, it is one of a series of questions, as when Mendelssohn wonders why she felt she knew best, where lies joy, and specifically: "Why should I feel guilty about being happy?" She looks to a pastoral idyll once enjoyed in Wales (possibly in 1972) as a time when the natural world, namely flowers, could be observed "quietly getting on with blooming without asking

themselves if that's OK or not by anyone else, let alone the State."²⁶ Growing doubts about endless doubting coalesce around the question of self categorisation. Mendelssohn continues:

Who am I if I'm not a revolutionary?

I was terrified of losing that identity, it had been a source of such joy and such sharing. I was terrified of that label being replaced by another—hippy, dropout, sellout, escapist. None of those fitted me. Only no-label—only a new openness to that unmapped untrodden territory [...] I was alone, and could only look to myself, finally, for validity. There was no nourishment anymore in the Revolution as the Solution.

And then I thought I'd found the new solution—the revolution only changes the form of things, is still an interference, an imposition of ideas, the same as it replaces—going in is the only way out, the inner alchemy will bring the outer transformation. At least my new solution wasn't linear, at least it wasn't so blind, so self-deceiving. But still it was a solution, an answer, me thinking I know, that if only every one else could see things like me, be persuaded—still it was a violence.

I realised that I can't bear things as they are because I can't bear pain. That I can't bear others' pain because I can't bear my own pain [...] That really I don't know anything, I don't have a solution, I'm not a great saviour. I'm just me. I'm just a question mark, and the world is my playground.

Solutions are just another form of violence—State violence or revolutionary violence, what's the difference? It takes 2 to play that ball-game and I don't want to play it—though I'm sure I will lots and lots more times because I'll forget, because rules make you feel like you know what's going on, and there's always the hope of winning...

The world, Mendelssohn continues, is irrefutably ugly. Political governance is always violence against the individual; imposing solutions upon others is also "plain violent." She concludes:

And now that I'm not a revolutionary, that I'm not trying to change the world, that I'm not trying to stop the ugliness so that I don't have to feel my pain—I'm overcome by wave upon wave of it. Finally I belong. The pain is me, I am pain. And I am the flower and the hills and the trees, the laughter and the song...²⁷

Written twenty years before Mendelssohn's sonnet, this autobiographical passage unmistakably anticipates its terms. A youthful dive "into unmapped, untrodden territory" is thrillingly, then nauseatingly, vertiginous; things fall apart, and questioning peripheries cannot hold in a world so insistently replete with answers. Forward-facing faces have "no where to lean....except against" the immediate self, "the cup of the palm of this hand" that hides as much as it protects. Mendelssohn finds that revolutionary language quickly becomes as conformist, and as violent, as that which it was meant to replace. And in the aftermath of revolutionary fervour, she is thrust painfully upon her

own identity, condemned to a subjectivity wracked by irresolvable scrutiny. Is this eternal incertitude the bleak culmination of Nietzsche's philosophy?

Mendelssohn's was an incredibly erudite, voracious mind, one that indubitably engaged in her later years with the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, among countless others.²⁸ But what saves her from yielding completely to pain is not her often sardonic sense of humour, not her late night piano compositions, not even the loyalty she charismatically engendered from dozens of admiring, patient friends, associates, readers. Ultimately, Mendelssohn is rescued by the merciful inexorability of Art, by material expanses of page and canvas, by figuration and representation, by language that heals and maims, then heals again. And if we, good modernist inheritors all, mistrust her identification with the natural—"I am the flower and the hills and the trees"—we're right to do so: this halcyon vision is unsustainable, as the utopia of a world where one can simply, restfully be, a world of permissible questions and plainly self-evident answers will always be beyond Mendelssohn's reach. For her, these ambiguities will remain an agony as violent as any solution.

IV

Anna Mendelssohn was born in 1948 in Stockport, a town near Manchester. Her father Morris was a respected Labour councillor who fought with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Her mother, Clementina, was a member of the Manchester International Women for Peace, and took an active part in the family business, a local market stall. The family's Jewish heritage was central, defining: a certificate in Mendelssohn's papers confirms that on the occasion of her first birthday, her parents had three trees planted in Israel in their daughter's name.²⁹ During World War II, Tina volunteered to care for refugee Jewish children, some rescued from concentration camps, and this harrowing experience was often recounted to Mendelssohn and her younger sister Judi. Though both of her parents were forced to leave school and seek employment in their early teens,

they were clearly intellectually ambitious for their offspring: newspaper clippings of Mendelssohn's childhood achievements indicate that she grew up in a cultured household, entering music and elocution contests, performing in local theatre productions and the Manchester Youth Orchestra.³⁰ Mendelssohn was Head Girl at Stockport High School for Girls, and like so many of her generation, became the first member of her family to attend university.

From the late seventies until her death in 2009, Mendelssohn compiled a half dozen works of short fiction and some fifteen collections of poetry, including three collections with Equipage Press and her perfect-bound volume, *Implacable Art* (2000).³¹ Throughout these decades, Mendelssohn published avidly in journals receptive to experimental writing, among them, *Parataxis*, *Jacket 2*, and *Critical Quarterly*. The presses Methuen, Bloodaxe, and Burning Deck actively pursued book-length editions of her work. From 1990 to 2004, her writing was included in five major anthologies, among them, Denise Riley's *Poets on Writing* (1992) and Iain Sinclair's influential *Conductors of Chaos* (1996).³² By the late eighties, Mendelssohn was inundated with invitations to read from Cambridge colleges, London's Royal Festival Hall, the Southbank Centre, associates in New York and New Hampshire, and, in 1997, the Pompidou Centre in Paris. And none of this literary endeavour even begins to encapsulate the extent of Mendelssohn's visual art. Though she worked with pastel, coloured pencil, felt-tip pens, oil, and water colour, Mendelssohn's mature artwork is predominantly pen and ink, a medium in which she skilfully blurs the divide between the written and the pictorial. Perhaps most stunning in this regard are her accomplished experiments in an ideogrammatic tradition, which gesture to the work of Pound, Michaux, and Jack Smith of the Kitchen Sink School. Mendelssohn's international modernist credentials are impeccable: during a trip to Turkey in 1969, she translated the poetry of political exile Nâzim Hikmet; late in life, she met and began compiling the work of the surrealist Gisele Prassinis, the child prodigy "discovered" by

André Breton. Her poetry considers revolutionary modernists Anna Ahkmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Federico Garcia Lorca. And so on.

Two legal battles parenthesise Mendelssohn's adulthood, both of them distinctly marked by her belief, as a young adult, that revolution was the solution. The first was the Stoke Newington 8 trial of 1972, which was, until the recent phone-hacking scandal, the longest criminal trial in British history. Active in the London underground scene from at least 1970, Mendelssohn came into contact with members of the urban guerrillas, The Angry Brigade.³³ Still lacking a well-researched history, and absent from most studies of contemporary terrorism, The Angry Brigade was part of a recognised wave of predominantly middle-class, educated youth who became disenchanted by the inefficacies of democratic protest. Of the same lineage as their infamous counterparts, including Weather Underground in the USA, the Front de Libération du Quebec in Canada, The Red Brigades in Italy, and Baader-Meinhoff in Germany, The Angry Brigade revolution was comparatively minimal, involving no murders or kidnappings. Their activities included about two dozen small-scale attacks, primarily bombings of largely unoccupied police stations, businesses, embassies, politicians' residences, and a BBC van at a Miss World beauty pageant in 1970.³⁴ Anna Mendelssohn's fingerprints were discovered on a sheet torn from *Rolling Stone* magazine found in a bag containing one of those bombs. Fourteen sets of fingerprints were located in the same bag; eleven were never identified. Though Mendelssohn, scarcely 24 years of age, pleaded not guilty and defended herself in court with the brilliance and skill of a seasoned lawyer, she was convicted under conspiracy charges on December 6, 1972. Mendelssohn received a ten-year sentence, to be served at Her Majesty's Holloway Prison in London, an institution that became female-only in 1903, and became well-known for detaining the Pankhurst suffragettes.³⁵

In prison, Mendelssohn taught her fellow inmates literacy, petitioned for improved conditions, and ran dramatic productions, including a performance of *Peter Pan* where she cast

herself as Captain Hook. These efforts prompted her early parole in 1977. Between 1980 and 1985, Mendelssohn had three longed-for children. In 1983, she changed her name by deed poll to Sylvia Grace Louise Lake.³⁶ In 1984, she enrolled at the University of Cambridge. Mendelssohn's writing indicates that the late seventies and early eighties were relatively happy years. Her love for her children runs palpably through her work; though always impassioned, her poetry in this period has a levity and whimsicality later overtaken by vehemence. This is not to negate the struggles associated with her twin, all-absorbing ambitions to be a parent and a successful student at an excruciatingly paternalistic institution. Mendelssohn believed that the community should help her raise her children; in a different world, this attitude might be incontrovertible. But one family upon whom she relied heavily desired a better routine, financial assistance, and the involvement of a third party: social services. For a woman who had served time, the scrutiny of her daily machinations by authority figures was a source of pronounced distress; still more worrying was the possibility that the vexed past she had scarcely put behind her might be unearthed in family court, to which Mendelssohn feared returning. Poverty exerted its daily grind, as did ill health and the stigma of single parenthood. In 1988, she gave permission to have her children temporarily fostered; they were never returned to her care. Mendelssohn's case was harrowing and traumatising; when it was finished, the lawyer who defended her renounced child custody litigation.³⁷

In the twenty years following the loss of her children, Mendelssohn read, wrote, and drew unremittingly. Now permanently housed at the University of Sussex, her archive is a phenomenal repository of visual art, nearly 800 closely-written notebooks, at least 5,000 poems, as well as a vast array of loose papers, letters, and memorabilia.³⁸ Throughout these materials, Mendelssohn steadfastly rejects her political past, railing against and identifying with the Left and identity politics, feminism included. She professed her innocence, and her loathing of extremism and violence, until her death in 2009.

V

In 1888, Verlaine asks: “is it not true that...the sincere poet will see himself, will feel himself, will know himself *damned* by the rule of any faction, o Stello?” The accursed poet is always at odds with himself and others, his spiritual and intellectual transcendence as “poet” undercut by an abjectly slippery slope of contradiction, descended wilfully and unstoppably. Eschewing category, existing on the margins of the culture that defines him, the accursed poet deliberately turns away from the good, right, and true in favour of immorality, incertitude, and error. Paradox is his pleasure: he exists to offer himself to masses who reject him; he clings passionately to a mortality replete with self-imposed suffering, and likely brief. Perversion is his freedom: knowing full well what is reasonable, logical, and expected, he behaves foolishly and stubbornly, risking all in the (actively repressed) hopes of literary legacy, a future of inconceivable and ever-deferred accord. The Baedeker of this hapless, exalted journey is Alfred de Vigny’s *Stello: A Session with Doctor Noir* (1832), which pits the idealist poet and titular hero Stello against his psychiatrist, Noir. Stello believes that poetry can change the world, and Noir undertakes to cure Stello of his sentimental malaise. Stello is informed that poets are necessarily social pariahs, figures sullied by affiliation with the predictable mediocrities of waged labour, popular reception, and politics, the latter being the worst culprit in the destruction of poetic genius. Among the extensive exhibition of “melancholy phantoms” that Noir uses to illustrate his arguments we find “Dryden at seventy, dying in poverty and seeking in astrology a vain consolation for human injustice” (170). Against the dreadful fate of the beleaguered likes of Milton or Cervantes before him—a host of writers exiled, overlooked, ill, poor in their lifetimes—Doctor Noir offers a prescription: cultivate a purely perfunctory relationship to politics; work alone, avoiding institutions, affiliations, and audience; and finally, privilege endless contemplation over decisive action (179-80).

Verlaine's apostrophe to Stello voices his debt to Vigny, whose terms he extends throughout *The Accursed Poets* (1884; 1888). This essay anthology is interspersed with poems by the condemned rogues upon whom it rhapsodises: Tristan Corbière, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marceline Desbordes-Lalmore, Villiers De L'Isle-Adam, and Pauvre Lelian (an anagram of Paul Verlaine), with Baudelaire as the absent presence at its heart.³⁹ Verlaine celebrates their capacity to withstand life's aches, pains, and injustices, as well as their rejection by the masses. Less prescriptive than Vigny, Verlaine is more hagiographic, more oxymoronic: his poets importantly suffer, but transcend that suffering through self-conscious genius; they are "exquisitely perverse, ravishingly chaste" (46). They do not need publications or audiences, but as Mallarmé has both, Verlaine dismisses these worrying tokens of success as "enormous minor detail[s]" (59). Stubborn contrariness is crucial to their combined fates: when poor, they reject money; when rich, they shun an easier life; obsessively, desperately in thrall to their art, they are nevertheless commanding, heroic. Verlaine thus demonstrates how, as we approach the twentieth century, sacrifice is increasingly posited as an authenticating individual choice rather than a societal ritual. Verlaine directly influences Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1908), an anthology that replicates the terms and format of *Les Poètes Maudits*, celebrating madness, excess, and the "long vagabondage" of the lives of Verlaine and his underappreciated, accursed, poetic peers (34).⁴⁰ The ethos of *Les Poètes Maudits* will similarly underpin the philosophy of Georges Bataille, for whom perversion, irrationality, and voluntary sacrifice are viable alternatives to confining necessity and "productive," alienating labour.⁴¹ Bataille turns to figures such as Van Gogh to drag the self-sacrificial mode of the accursed poet from its darkened back alley haven into the light of philosophical validation. For Bataille, Van Gogh's severance of a body part is a literal, marvellous synecdoche of his disengagement with the world entire, a succinct measure of the artist's capacity to rush headlong into the abyss of cultural alienation, a reinstatement of the declining "custom of sacrifice" (67).⁴²

So pervasive is the motif of the accursed poet that by 1964 Asger Jorn invokes it to decry its twentieth-century efficacy, surely the most obvious of *maudit* moves. Jorn's portrait of Guy Debord, Lettrist-cum-Situationist International founder, evinces predictable features: poet-philosopher Debord is a member of a group of "bad boys who represent true originality" against whom the public "lashes out in good conscience...in order to cut them off permanently from creative activity" (158-59).⁴³ Resilient against this severing, Debord instead refuses celebrity, admirably seeking a difficult and obscure life. And his sufferings and heroism far exceed those of his accursed predecessors:

Paradoxically, the general sympathy toward modernism since the turn of the [twentieth] century, and especially since World War II when it was proclaimed that 'the accursed artist no longer exists,' represses these creative forces even more radically. The reality of social malediction is wrapped in a tranquilising and antiseptic appearance of emptiness: *the problem has disappeared; there never was a problem*. At the same time, the journalistic label of 'accursed' becomes, on the contrary, an immediate valorization. It is enough to get yourself cursed, to be all the rage. (157)

Artists are now condemned only to be swallowed entire, assimilated into the culture they work against, writes Jorn, noting that this process originated in ancient sacrificial rituals. An outlaw genius, Debord cannot be neutralised in this manner. Jorn's terms are well over a century old, with a significant distinction: "our hero" Debord differs from Doctor Noir's ideal artists because Debord's creativity promotes action, and by extension, engages directly in politics (161-62). These politics will come to fruition in the much-discussed relationship between the Situationist International and the events of May '68.⁴⁴ But in fusing sacrifice with the accursed poet, Jorn is in perfect accord with Vigny, who has Noir tell Stello: "The bloody sacrifice of a few men for many will continue until the end of the world. The nations will continue to buy their salvation forever by the *substitution of expiatory suffering*." (132). For Vigny, the poet cannot undo this truth, and will almost inevitably suffer from it. And so, at the close of *Stello*, Noir intones:

"The Poet bears a curse upon his life and a blessing on his name. The Poet, apostle of the ever-youthful truth, is a source of perpetual umbrage to the man of Power, apostle of an

obsolete fiction; for the one is inspired, the other has at best some power of concentration or some ingenuity of mind.' (181)

Power is convention, a product of the “ridiculous falsehood” that is “social order” (172). But if “[p]ower is irreconcilable with...poetic essence,” the poet needs protection (173). And he is infinitely and infantilely fragile, as Noir details: “the Multitude, while carrying you in its arms, looks askance on you as it does on all its children, and from time to time it will throw you on the ground and trample you underfoot. The crowd makes a bad mother” (165). In thrall to a vicious audience and his own indecisiveness, the poet passively awaits his muse. Verlaine will turn Vigny’s fragile poetic equivocations into capriciousness, the consequence of a gloriously contemplative will that is weak, perverse, self-serving. Jorn comfortably straddles both camps, exalting the accursed Debord still more for inhabiting a collapsing paradox. Throughout, vacillation and victimhood retain their heroism.

Though damned, the legacy of the accursed poet is pervasive, arguably at work since the fifteenth century, if not before.⁴⁵ But its celebrated heyday is the decadent *fin-de-siècle*, itself delineated by the very paradoxes that define Verlaine’s *les poètes maudits*, not least being the pleasure taken in destruction, decline, and apocalypse. Luxuriousness, vice, and excess are on offer to ground heady, newfound uncertainties of intellection, and, crucially, aesthetic experimentation and indeterminacy. Who will read or care about this new verse? What does it achieve? Beneath Verlaine’s fatuous prose, genuine anxiety lurks. Verlaine demonstrates what Nordau will discern as key traits of the degenerate mind: an affinity for digression and “malevolent mania for contradiction” (319).⁴⁶ Verlaine’s foreword likens “the verses of these dear Cursed ones” to “bronzes from decadent Rome,” prompting Verlaine’s arch query: “but what does ‘decadent’ really mean?” (11). “[T]hey call us ‘decadents’” he notes later in the volume, adding, with satiric self-reflexivity superbly on show: “(an insult, between parentheses, implying picturesque, autumnal, with a setting sun, to sum it up).” Against these sullies, Verlaine invokes his damned poets’ pursuit of “the impeccable” (87). His

vacillations and protestations are admirably consistent; like Nietzsche, Verlaine avowed and disavowed his own decadence.⁴⁷ Antipodal thinking allows Verlaine to trounce audiences in a text published with a view to making money, whilst arguing that what will lift the curse of his “admirable poet[s]” is success “—you understand?—” (123).⁴⁸ Do we? Can we? The impossible pretence of the apolitical cursed poet is similarly maintained, so that Rimbaud’s sympathy with the Paris Commune, and his 1871 trek to participate in the insurgency, is reduced to “some stay in Paris, then diverse, more or less frightful pilgrimages” (60). Poetry is all, and Verlaine’s excisions and confluences reflect anthology content, encompassing the poetic terms of, say, Corbière’s “Epitaph” of himself, which celebrates a suicide caused by fervour *and* indolence, a lifelong “[v]igour without force” (17). And finally, Verlaine’s decadence allows his male subjects to incorporate femininity, of which the accursed poet-hero’s requisite martyrdom, or self-sacrificial bent, is a cogent indicator. This parodic, judicious identification with the feminine by European *fin-de-siècle* male authors is incisively delineated by Rita Felski, who points to cultivations of languidness and hypersensitivity, to their outward refusal of (“manly”) rationalism, utility, and progress.⁴⁹ To this list we might add a turn to passivity, indecisiveness, incertitude, and weakness.

Bearing in mind that for Nietzsche, circumlocution and dissidence are all, the genealogy of contemporary weakness he traces in *The Anti-Christ* (1888) begins with Christianity, which “proclaims a curse” against “*intellectual* well-constitutedness” that forbids roads to knowledge, and reduces doubtfulness to sin (hence Verlaine’s need to celebrate the “immorality” of the accursed poet, a figure unavoidably responsive to the Christian tradition).⁵⁰ For Nietzsche, piety is a contagious illness, infecting “hysterical women and rickety children” who cannot effectively perceive or behave, and are thus ideal “expressions of *décadence*” (169). Nietzsche’s condemnatory linkages between faith, weakness, and effeminacy form the very motto of Anatole Baju’s journal, *Le Décadent* (1886-89): “Man becomes more refined, more feminine, more divine.”⁵¹ Key to this strapline is that

man chooses to become, whilst woman *is*. As Felski writes: “Whether hailed as subversive or condemned as pathological, [the *fin-de-siècle* male’s] femininity signals an unsettling of automatized perceptions of gender, whereas feminine qualities in a woman merely confirm her incapacity to escape her natural condition” (1099). Lifelong pliancy and self-effacement define woman’s condition, as attested by Otto Weininger’s bestseller, *Sex and Character* (1903). For Weininger, womankind has no sense of her own destiny, and cannot “discern fate.” She may undertake the extreme measure of overcoming her victimisation and objectification by affecting hysteria, but these efforts are feeble and transparent:

at the last moment [women] will kiss the man who ravishes them, and succumb with pleasure to those whom they have resisted violently. It is as if women were under a curse. At times she feels the weight of it, but she never flees from it. Her shrieks and her ravings are not really genuine, and she succumbs to her fate at the moment when it has seemed the most repulsive to her. (279)⁵²

Though anxious, the accursed poet works toward a destiny: the belated recognition of his genius.

The accursed woman’s fate is violation and condemnation, a “slavery”; her “curse...is the evil will of man” but as “handmaid of the devil” it is a fate she deserves and upon which she depends (279; 299). For Weininger, this curse is defining and inescapable; for Paul Julius Möbius, it is a stick with which to beat the persecuted. A German neurologist believed to have influenced Weininger, Möbius maintained in 1900 that if woman ““fails in her duty to the species and insists on living her individual life for herself, she is struck as if by a curse.””⁵³

So totalising is woman’s malediction that further attempts at damnation merely affirm a continuum. The elusiveness of this wilful execration is why the only woman in Verlaine’s anthology, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, sits so uneasily amidst her unabashedly, triumphantly accursed peers. Distinguished from “negligible bluestockings” and the “proud and therefore male allure” of a George Sand, Desbordes-Valmore gains an entry in the second edition of *Les Poètes Mandits* because men Verlaine admires—Baudelaire, Rimbaud—have sung her praises (85; 115). Her talent is

qualified—“true albeit feminine”—and patronised as “adorable” (85). Desbordes-Valmore is celebrated for her self-effacement, as in the maternal anxieties of her poem “Renunciation”; her earnest, polite letting go of reason (which, naturally, abandons her first); and “[t]he entire forgetting of oneself” that marks both her love poetry and her envisioned legacy: “May my name be nothing but a soft, useless shadow, may it never cause fear or pain, may a pauper take it with him after talking to me and keep it long after in his consoled heart” (94). This is not a poet who yields to present-day obscurity with one eye on an assured, future fame. Gestures to decadent paradox can be discerned, as in “Letter to a Woman” that begins, coyly: “Woman, I know, shouldn’t write” (89). The speaker justifies her audacity because she writes only to be read by the beloved whilst suffering his absence; the poem culminates in a desire for his well-being predicated on the double-edged maxim: “wishing pain on one’s blessed other is to hate oneself” (90). But in the main, Desbordes-Valmore’s speakers proclaim their loyalty, long to appease, and are often awash in helpless weeping over immoralities and uncertainties. The self’s “weak heart” is excoriated, thus making Desbordes-Valmore “an angel” Verlaine is too “impotent to dissect” (110; 115). By these curiously rapacious terms, Verlaine cannot extend to Desbordes-Valmore the surgery he performs upon his accursed male peers, men distant enough from their own martyrdom that their self-sacrifice becomes either honourable or satirisable. Against the predatory, predictable delicacy of Verlaine’s critical touch, feminist vanguardists to come will rail: “by instinct, woman is not wise, is not pacifist, is not good... in somnolent periods of humanity she becomes too wise, too pacifist, too good” (111).⁵⁴ These words belong to the Futurist Valentine de Saint-Point, and the somnolent period in question is assuredly languid decadence. Against the idealising, definitional curse, Saint-Point demands that “woman reacquire” a long forgotten, productive “cruelty and violence” (112).

The historical vanguard to which the accursed poet belongs is inextricable from violence: the avant-garde positions itself at the forefront of a battalion, electing to be among the first to be

mowed down. Perceived as pacifist and “good,” women have always sat uneasily within this combative milieu, as critics have long discerned.⁵⁵ The wilful occupation of binaries joyously defines the accursed poet, or he who is hero/martyr, glorified/condemned, absolute/vacillating. This same dualism constitutes a double indemnity for the female: too obviously, whore/Madonna, unified in eliciting ready condemnation. For the female vanguardist, indemnity is augmented: aspiring to the artistic experiments of male-defined vanguards, she also participates within “the feminist critique of sexual ideologies, including the sexual ideology of some of those same avant-gardes” (Suleiman, xvii). Debordes-Valmore’s poetry challenges male bravado, if only through the suspect persistence of its reverent passivity. But this critique is implicit enough that Verlaine can safely objectify its speaker, neatly sidestepping introspection in the process.

Time may have worsened this split: consider Esther Leslie’s assessment of Anna Mendelssohn’s decades in Cambridge, where “she had some association, tangentially, with that most underground of poetic brotherhoods, the Cambridge Poets, now multigenerational” (28).⁵⁶ Multigenerational perhaps, but uni-gendered: Leslie lists eight affiliates, all male. Less diverse, then, than their Pre-Raphaelite forebears?⁵⁷ Avant-garde women who fight fire with fire—Saint-Point among them—often threaten their male peers, and the social order writ large. And assuredly, this is the role undertaken by what is perceived to be the most extreme participant in the aesthetic/political vanguard binary: the contemporary female terrorist. For if there was ever a figure genuinely accursed, it is surely she, as Amanda Third’s *Gender and the Political* attests:

In a manner that parallels Cesare Lombroso’s attempt to describe and categorise the female criminal in the late nineteenth century, [twentieth-century] terrorism studies has sought to delineate, and thus contain, the threat of the female terrorist. Terrorism studies discourse seeks to install clear-cut dimorphic boundaries, to categorise, name, and order, and in so doing, to (re)inscribe the limits of lawful opposition.... However, these distinctions always operate on uncertain ground, are always on the verge of collapsing.... And when the issue of gender is introduced into [these] uncertain hierarchies...the limits of its categories are thrown into sharp relief.... [P]recisely because terrorism studies operates with an overarchingly conservative understanding of gender—a framework that constitutes and is

constituted by the idea that femininity is obscure(d)—terrorism studies works to continually reproduce the female terrorist as elusive and unknowable. (47)⁵⁸

By this lineage, terrorism studies is feebly, deeply reliant upon the tactics of nineteenth-century intellectual and social history. And the worrying indefinability of the female terrorist is compounded by attempts to cohere two adamantly contrary discourses, both of which have underpinned readings of female protest since the *fin-de-siècle*. First, the female terrorist is the still more extreme other of her extreme male counterpart, and thus harbours an “unlimited capacity for violence, and...embod[ies] unfettered evil.” But as woman cannot be wilful or autonomous, she is only passively involved in terrorism as an extension of her “sexual and emotional affiliations with men” (Third, 44). This latter view informs *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*, where celebrated activist Robin Morgan recounts how “Anna Mendleson, formerly of the Angry Brigade in the United Kingdom” publicly and emphatically acknowledged that the group’s activities effected no change. Morgan refuses to accept Mendelssohn’s disavowals as genuine criticism, stating instead, and with zero evidence to hand, that “they have the ring of disillusion voiced by women betrayed in love” (208).⁵⁹ With feminists like these, who needs Weininger? An undated letter addressed to Morgan exists in Mendelssohn’s papers, deploring this unpermitted, slanderous misuse of her language and identity.⁶⁰ The missive remains unsent. Mendelssohn could not have been more acutely aware that any female branded a terrorist is perceived as the ultimate combatant and the least trustworthy victim. Elsewhere, often, Mendelssohn bitterly recounts how she “became known (with much revulsion) as the Angry Brigade girl.”⁶¹

VI

In 1988, Mendelssohn pens a five-page tract, “One of the Forever Damned?”⁶² As the titular question suggests, the memoir manuscript continues the quest for certainty and quietude that

underpins “I thought I had all the answers.” Mendelssohn begins by discussing the study period preceding her final exams at Cambridge in 1986:

I want to describe what happened at a crucial juncture. I was very happy at the thought of the coming examinations. It had given me great pleasure to work. It was such a quiet, useful thing to be doing for the children; for myself and for the children. I had never been so happy, regardless of all the problems. The positive part was that having worked hard I had ample material on which to concentrate to produce some good answers, to produce some answers which would have been interesting to write.

This happiness is disrupted by a sense that unidentified individuals “were putting spokes in [her] wheel,” disrupting Mendelssohn’s attempt to give her “children [...] a firm sense of [her] identity” via academic study, a plan that she claims elicited discouragement from female peers. Mendelssohn also perceives a more abstract threat: a man who lurks on the periphery and desires her death; this figure, clad in black, emerging “from the direction of the graveyard” might be literal or figurative, possibly oneiric, certainly nightmarish. She continues:

A young woman had been sent from the North to help me with the children through the intensively important period prior to the examination week. I had it organized in my mind. However guilty I felt about enrolling other people’s help I knew that at some point in the not-too-distant future, I should be able to give help in return. But people are impatient. Impatient and Intolerant.

The children’s help would not leave me alone to concentrate. I never lost my temper with her but I did try to gently explain that I could not work if she kept sailing into the room and cheerily chatting about all and sundry. Oh it hurt my heart sorely to have to be that woman with no time for anyone else. It would have been so much more beautiful to be able to lie on the rug and play with my relatively new-born baby [...] But it wouldn’t be long before I could play with her, hold her, gaze at her and stroke her cheek. It wouldn’t be long before I could draw all three of them on large pieces of cartridge paper, never ceasing to marvel at how they never stayed still for a moment.

People who didn’t know what art was about would come and look at my drawings and say that doesn’t look like but they didn’t have the faintest idea of the process. To register anything about children is a miracle and a wonder; it is holy, it is innocent, it is life.

What worries me is that I have given away everything before. I have seen my life being taken from me by people who thought that they deserved it rather more than I did [...] Life is such a learning process that it is hard to say that the uncertainties and fears of yesterday will not reveal themselves as natural and not just some terrible individual idiosyncratic deficiencies which had been branded into you from birth by a malevolent force who had been instructed to deem you one of the forever damned.

A lady over the road who lived in a larger house offered me the use of one of her daughter’s rooms. “Install yourself in there” she said “and revise to your heart’s content.”

But after only one day she came to me with the news that her daughter was returning at the weekend and would need her room back.

Excuse me a moment, whilst I ring the bell for the manservant to bring me some tea. It is about four in the morning & I'm parched [...]

If I really had a manservant I would reach a more formed level in my writing, in my life; I could organise things, dimensions would fall into place, I would be more sure of myself and everyone whom I liked would think me a "lovely person."⁶³

But no. I rush headlong into desperate sliding anarchy and this really offends my taste. Therefore I find myself offensive. I most certainly do object to this style of writing.

Mendelssohn cannot find succour in her role as an academic parent; like the artwork that does not overtly represent her children, her intellectual aspirations are misunderstood. Her discomfort with realist aesthetics boils over into a rejection of the very prose she writes. She continues with a deprecation of old Communists and their sentimental, nostalgic, "[s]noring" autobiographies, referencing too-limited responses to leftist activity past and present, including the Rosenberg espionage trial in America in the fifties, and the women of Action Directe who are on hunger strike in a French prison. Her thoughts turn to her father, also an ex-Communist, and his political railings. Trouble and loss pervade these musings, as do unresolved attempts to protect her children's psyches. "[M]usic saved" my own psyche, she observes, recalling instances of going without food to afford the opera. She concludes by returning to writing, remembering how, as a joke, she had once typed, "There is an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile buried in the back garden" and handed it with exaggerated ceremony to her then-housemate, John Barker. "That piece of paper was produced as evidence against me in court" she comments ruefully, noting, by way of conclusion, that her father was right to tell her that writing is dangerous.

"One of the Forever Damned?" is fairly typical of Mendelssohn's later prose, fraught with resistance to an evidently irresistible discursive autobiographical style, and replete with blame of self and others, even as it yields to Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's idealistic "maternal tremblings!" (87).⁶⁴ Mendelssohn admires and loathes vanguardists whose fate counters, replicates, or betters her own.⁶⁵ She oscillates between indebtedness and entitlement, and these warring affects come to comic

fruition as she breaks off from her narrative of lived malediction to imagine herself a gentrified lady author with servants at her beck and call, rather than an impoverished student and single parent reliant upon ineffectual, temporary generousities.⁶⁶ Desires for money, luxury, ease surface throughout Mendelssohn's writings, often not so comically. Mendelssohn resents her political past for preventing ready access to employment, and her experimental proclivities for ensuring that she cannot earn a living by writing or art. Yet she cannot stop writing, justifying, protesting her personal injustices. Mendelssohn might be seen as the emblematic "graphomaniac," a term Nordau lifts from Lombroso and defines as a person with a flaccid grasp on reality and "a strong impulse to write" (18); these compositions revolve repetitiously around the distressed self.⁶⁷ But it is the very acuteness of Mendelssohn's self-consciousness that troubles just such a diagnosis. Mendelssohn loved Auden, a truth that may well be tied to his famous suggestion that "poetry makes nothing happen." Politics devoured Mendelssohn's life; she did not want it to devour her artistry also. Instead, Mendelssohn wanted to wear politics down, grinding and hacking at its monumentality with a view to erecting a poetics free and clear of its contrivances. Paradoxically, this process involved a continual return to the site of the political. Still more paradoxical was Mendelssohn's weapon of choice: she levied an assault on political system with the lived reality of the personal, all in the full and certain knowledge of the feminist maxim that the personal *is* political, that these realms are inextricable. This self-imposed, irresolvable malediction was exacerbated by a gendered double standard that insisted its resilient, condemnatory way into her vanguardism.⁶⁸ Hence Mendelssohn labels the female poet a "poetess." An archaic term easily mistaken as satirically deployed, Mendelssohn sincerely values this gendered distinction, in part because it does fuller justice to the extent of her accursedness.⁶⁹

"One of the Forever Damned?" is graphophilic and graphophobic. A more universal language, music saves the psyche. In the academic world to which Mendelssohn aspires, words are savoured, definitive answers are requested and performed. In 1986, Mendelssohn proves incapable

of this performance, failing to get her Cambridge degree. For her, words are too perilously open to misinterpretation, to condemnation. “[H]ow close is writing to the Law, how ineffective and too much written in the weight of the law, to the poetess?” she asks.⁷⁰ Or consider, again in infuriated catechistical style, from an untitled poem beginning “This is the reason why I do not conform.”:

The dangers in writing are inherent.
Why it is dangerous to criticize the Establishment
Openly. Why what amuses the Establishment
is the Bad Use of language and Sex.
Why women are discussed in terms of knickers.
Why it is important not to lose control
Of one’s own mind. Why Literature
Frames novices. Why Framing is a sociopolitical act. (*Implacable Art*, 84)

This extract is cautionary tale and lived truth: female objectification is relentless, and women critiquing the establishment risk both objectification and obliteration of the rational faculties. Mendelssohn spoke from long experience, as a single example from her youth illustrates. In 1969, or the same year that Mendelssohn took part in Godard’s *British Sounds* at the University of Essex, some students at Cambridge launched what became known as a Campaign Against Assessment. In the culminating move of their Situationist-inspired, year-long protest against the university, these students entered their exam halls in June 1969 and tore up their final examination papers.⁷¹ The gesture was public and deliberately inflammatory, highly symbolic and a genuine breaking of their three-year contract with Oxbridge. These students left the university without degrees in hand; among their number was John Barker, Mendelssohn’s housemate who received her missile missive, and who ultimately became her dock-mate. In 1972, Barker was convicted alongside Mendelssohn at the end of the Stoke Newington 8 trial.

To fast forward abruptly: in 1989, or two decades after the Campaign Against Assessment, Mendelssohn makes a second attempt at completing the final year of a Cambridge degree in English, at completing the very exams Barker tore up. The day of her final exam, Mendelssohn writes a letter to her friend, Lynne Harries, describing the experience: “In a state of semi-paralysis I did the

exams—best two papers uncompleted—...Demoralised yet committed answers, too contentious—I'm being hopeful when I say 2/2.”⁷² Having acknowledged the possibility of failure, Mendelssohn's thoughts turn to Ed Dorn's mentor, Black Mountain poet Charles Olson, whose work she is reading and wants to lend to Lynne's daughter.⁷³ As in her daily life, in this letter, Mendelssohn's educational ambition is supplanted by her voracious auto-didacticism; the breadth and incessancy of her reading defies encapsulation.⁷⁴ But the letter also elucidates the tragedy of an individual resolutely unable to articulate definitive answers; a person who begins, but leaves incomplete, at least three undergraduate degrees.⁷⁵ Writing the poet and theorist Denise Riley in August 1990, Mendelssohn states that her “papers were ‘too academically unconventional for the Exam committee to feel (!) that they were in a fit position to judge.’”⁷⁶ In her stunning memoir of Mendelssohn, Harries counters this blasé appraisal:

In the early summer of 1989, [Mendelssohn...] told me that the Finals results were posted on the Senate House but her own name was not on the list. This never happens, I kept saying, it's a printing error. It wasn't: she had ignored the questions on her papers and written a tirade against the lack of nursery provision in the university. Later, she petitioned to get the 'Fail' changed to 'Unclassified', leaving the academic door once again ajar....It is impossible to exaggerate the value she placed on being acknowledged as a serious, scholarly person.⁷⁷

The divergence that arises between Barker and Mendelssohn is self evident: where Barker's Cambridge protest was a sacrifice heroic and historicised, Mendelssohn's was a plea for help in the private, domestic realm she was expected to manage with innate aplomb. Mendelssohn strove to hold aloft drives academic, artistic, parental; she aimed to be Rimbaud *and* Desbordes-Valmore. Demoralised, committed, contentious, she found the role of *une poétesse maudite* the only habitable solution. But as this role is self-cancelling, Mendelssohn remained a no-label, a question mark, treating the Cambridge University Library through her fifties as a second home whilst retaining the status “unclassified.”

VII

“Convictions are prisons,” Nietzsche intones (*Anti-Christ*, 172). But equally, freedom exists in irrefutable pronouncements—say, for instance, of one’s innocence. This is a contrary truth that Nietzsche’s method sustains. Nietzsche considered *ressentiment* a form of weakness or invalidism, in which the defensive and offensive instincts soften, and “everything hurts.” Against this infection there is only one cure, which Nietzsche labels Russian fatalism, or

that fatalism without rebellion with which a Russian soldier for whom the campaign has become too much at last lies down in the snow. No longer to take anything at all, to receive anything, to take anything *into* oneself—no longer to react at all.... The great rationality of this fatalism, which is not always the courage to die but can be life-preservative under conditions highly dangerous to life, is reduction of the metabolism, making it slow down, a kind of will to hibernation.... (15)⁷⁸

Nietzsche claims that when convalescent, he experiences this state, “clinging tenaciously...to almost intolerable situations, places, residences, company, once chance had placed me in them” (16). After detailing these unbearable periods of passivity at length, the next section of *Ecce Homo* turns to war, asserting Nietzsche’s love of aggression, and his capacity to be an enemy with a strong nature: “to attack,” Nietzsche writes, “is with me a proof of good will” (17). An established *philosophe maudit*, it is via his fundamental discordancy that Nietzsche so comfortably, so prophetically lays claim to being both avant- *and* arrière-garde.⁷⁹ Where avant-gardistes lead a battalion, the arrière-garde brings up the rear, continuing to fight even when defeat is imminent. Where avant-gardism becomes an aesthetic category in the first half of the nineteenth century, the arrière-garde does not come artistically into play until the 1950s, taking root in anxieties about the lost vitalism of the pre-war avant-gardes, and the concern that novelty is now traditional. Pre-World War I, the arrière-garde referred to artists hanging on to bygone traditions political and aesthetic; post-World War II, the arrière-garde begins to refer to “artists seeking to renew and defend the avant-garde legacy, to maintain the innovative strength of high modernism, in the knowledge that their efforts are belated and potentially anachronistic” (20).⁸⁰

Weak theory propagates encounters with the fullness of one's decline, an experience not unlike Nietzsche's fatalism, of clinging tenaciously, conservatively, to the terms of an all-but-finished battle. And the campaign it defends, and to which it returns, originates with decadence. This truth may be site-specific: in Italy, the birthplace of *il pensiero debole*, what Anglophones call modernism is *decadentismo*.⁸¹ But well beyond nomenclature, the defining terms of weak thought replicate decadent mores with stunning precision: dissolution, finality, resignation, weariness, passivity, invalidism, contagion, nihilism—all conduits to novelties aesthetic and intellectual, even as past tradition is held dear, sustained. Paradox frames weak theorists' emphatic refusal of emphatic claims.⁸² And decadence is further discernible in weak theorists' argument—objectionably privileged at best—that a society that has at last overcome material necessity can revel in the luxuries of incertitude and experimental aesthetics.⁸³ In "Languor," this very view prompts Verlaine to align *fin-de-siècle* decadence with the decline of the Roman Empire. Verlaine and Nietzsche have the temerity to openly recognise and disavow their decadent affiliations. This temerity wanes through twentieth century, where Marxists, Vorticists, and Futurists openly rail against the same. Decadence is an insult, even as theorists increasingly refute mastery in favour of a feminine passivity, heroising martyrdom, or the über-decadent mandate of *les poètes maudits*.⁸⁴ Derided, decadent innovation determines contemporary vanguard practice in a manner that goes peculiarly unacknowledged, as though twentieth-century critics continued swallowing wholesale Marinetti's self-serving, anxious rejection.⁸⁵ Of late, Vincent Sherry has usefully expounded upon the wilful suppression and extraordinary influence of decadence upon the very modernist writers that insulted or dismissed its preoccupations, but *Five Faces of Modernity* (1977) is surely the forerunner in this regard, as author Matei Calinescu insists upon the virtual interchangeability of decadence and the vanguard.⁸⁶ For Calinescu, decadent intellection precipitates the modernist thematic of crisis, and in turn, an all-defining "unbounded relativism" (5). For Calinescu, today's countercultural "questioning of unity" is

a decadent construct (312). Avant depends upon arrière. But weak theorists maintain that theirs is “a philosophy that some old-timers have erroneously tagged ‘decadent’ and ‘crepuscular’” when it is in fact “a positive, life-affirming, creative approach to life” (13).⁸⁷ Easily incorporating both of these factions, decadence may prove more wilfully oscillatory than weak theory itself.

In an untitled poem, Mendelssohn recounts the experience of “a woman [who] cries in the night between her innocent shoulders” even as “her mind was met by texts that held her.”⁸⁸ Seeking reassurance, safe containment, this woman is at least partly grounded; “she cannot dive, there is no pool, she wants to stay in the rain today.” (Perhaps she too has already plummeted, “fallen young into [her] mind”?) Avoiding diagnosis, because psychiatrists would “be poets if they weren’t so rich”, “she tells the gulleys she left behind what it is to show that / confidential innocence is not universally exciting.” Furrows worn and well-travelled, gullies are also sharp knives, weapons. To these emblems of her past, this woman proclaims a secret, unacknowledged innocence, one that sets the world alight for no one but herself. The longing for an impossible absolution is comically scabrous, urgently palpable. Recognising herself as a humble member of the “country folk worn down over time”—“it’s country fairs we share”—the speaker moves beyond even this rural margin, running “off into the mists by the swamps where the convicts sank”. Eschewing the brand of the precocious, controversial artist, the *enfant terrible*, she takes on the guise of the feral “*enfante sauvage*,” one who “read[s] by the light of the moon.” In this embittered, enforced retreat, “Oscar’s spirit brushed her every movement into the powers of decadence.” The next, concluding line reads: “she learnt the merits of dissonance & watched the fairs fade.” The overt contrariness of Oscar Wilde, an artist who endured injustice, imprisonment, and was ultimately (almost) universally exonerated, sustains this *enfante sauvage*, permitting the past—and its painful ambiguities—to momentarily recede.

VIII

Limitlessness as necessity risks obsession, “pain without end, the fall into bottomlessness” (127).⁸⁹ Signs exist of an emergent weariness with inexhaustibility. Charles Altieri argues that some key avant-garde mandates—semantic indeterminacy, a reliance upon the dogged continuities of readerly or audience reconstruction—replicate the social norms they challenge, affirming, for instance, the capitalist promotion of false autonomy and consumerist choice. For Altieri, the endlessness of aesthetic interpretation is not necessarily positive, and he wonders if criticism “can [now] only be ‘authentic’ if it constantly undoes itself” (642).⁹⁰ While Altieri advocates a reevaluation of the too-easily dismissed arrière-garde, Alain Badiou turns to revolutionary successes of 1848 to advocate contemporary political insurrection as an escape route from the confines of our painful, intervallic period, one where we appear reduced to witnesses of “[t]he continuation, at all costs, of a weary world” (1).⁹¹ Where Vattimo castigates pronouncements of critical and political ideologies as “partial thinking,” the vanguardist Anna Mendelssohn writes about the intolerability of studied neutrality in a poem sublimely entitled, “never beiger”:

[...] I read of impassability
& live in the interface between received ideologies
which are both insulted and form armies
as the dreadful milk evaporates up the walls
the road poisonous to walk much distance upon⁹²

Against all battalions, be they avant or arrière, Mendelssohn posits the intractability of necessity, shamefully wasted sustenance, incapacitated free movement. The next line insists on stance-taking: “I am full of opinion which is the extraneity.” The speaker is a foreign element, an outsider, doggedly prepared to assert herself, if dogged by self-consciousness.

Vanguards aesthetic and political do not always intertwine, but against Verlaine’s indoctrination, *le poète maudit* Rimbaud is admired for emblematising this symbiosis, even as we remain ignorant of the details of his Parisian activism.⁹³ Similarly, Mendelssohn’s opening speech in

the Stoke Newington 8 trial carefully delineates her political and artistic vanguard activity up until that point, whilst curiously eliding mention of a journey to France in spring 1968.⁹⁴ If Mendelssohn failed to arrive in Paris, this “failure” would be consistent with her inability to complete degrees or to answer posed questions directly. In *Implacable Art*, she mocks “any who want poems to give them answers” because “a poem is not going to give precise directions / you mustn’t touch the hiding places. / they address a different world / where trees are decorated with diamonds” (34).

Mendelssohn’s love of art, as for the decadents, was rooted in its capacious incompatibilities: in artifice, the experiential, extreme intolerabilities of ambiguity could affirm, could co-exist. So it is that Mendelssohn uses the personal to decimate the political, as when she alludes, rather often, to the Situationist International slogan, “*Sous les pavés, la plage.*”⁹⁵ Consider “eulogy”:

she smoothes her skirt
to show her ineffectual language
unhappy to be english speaking
to the interesting sound of spoken greek
but what could she say? this is music
in comparison to what I speak
& that is really the crux of her problem
she feels another language not this one
she is impressed. she wants to learn
these new inflections.
but will she be seized
a traitor to the nation
he sings a sentence between talking them
it goes soft, it asserts, it narrates &
faces change, animate, picking up
on each others’ words
it sounds a bit italian, a bit spanish,
the girl who is with them
told me
that that was because they were speaking mediterranean.

I could see the sea & hear the towns
where the sea was calm & the buildings white
in the distance.
closer up were the boats
it has turned my desire around
I have travelled miles
these people have brought liquid vowels

in trowels loading them from beaches
& ports have delivered thoughts
of mediterranean timing.

(*Tondo Aquatique*, n.p.)

Accursed poet Corbière’s “Epitaph” proclaims that its speaker is “Too much his own to be able to suffer” and credits his demise to his unanticipated, yet foreseen “succes[s] as a failure” (18).

Mendelssohn’s speaker mourns a lived past without Corbière’s comic assuredness; she fears seizure, the brand “traitor,” sentencing. Language is dangerous, targeted; in its diversity, language is unstoppably appealing. Within the poem, a shoreline demarcates. Elsewhere, in what may prove her magnum opus, “Silk and Wild Tulips,” Mendelssohn describes how “the beach was too large for reality.”⁹⁶ In “eulogy” the poet travels miles to find “people [who] have brought liquid vowels / in trowels loading them from beaches.” The beach is uncontainable, liquid, sustained by manipulation and delivery; it is not an idealised expanse, a utopia just beneath the thin veneer of civilisation, tantalisingly within reach. What it might be, however, is a sounding board, an embankment. “And now that I’m not a revolutionary,” Mendelssohn writes in the late seventies, now “that I’m not trying to change the world...so that I don’t have to feel my pain—I’m overcome by wave upon wave of it.” In “eulogy,” the shoreline delimits and absorbs, and is defined in turn by a series of buildings: blank, rectilinear constructions. For Mendelssohn, the freshness of a clean sheet of paper is a requisite, proximate distance, an inviting port for syllables and thoughts. Necessary paths, necessary boundaries, “those thin lines of thought onto paper,” she writes in a letter in 1987, “are my *raison d’être*.”⁹⁷

NOTES

A year-long research fellowship from The Leverhulme Trust facilitated research on *les poètes maudits* and decadence more generally. I would like to thank Anna Mendelssohn’s children for their generous permission to quote from her unpublished memoir and complete poems.

In the citations below, all call numbers beginning “SxMs” refer to specific files in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive (1928-2013), University of Sussex Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton, UK.

¹ This feminine, inherently divided self readily recalls the terms of Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One* (Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). The overlap may be one of direct influence: in another work, this same poet offers a series of comically despairing apostrophes to feminists and theorists that includes Irigaray's peer Cixous, as well as Derrida, Woolf, and Stein (*Implacable Art*. Cambridge: Folio Press, 2002, 19).

² Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 39-52, 50.

³ These lines contain questions that are cut off by the flow of the sonnet, form subduing content, and emphasising the otherness to which the speaker must acquiesce. Consider lines three and four: "her interpretations / suited her best should I have no where to lean my face." "Should I have" is a concern begging debate; it is couched between the declarative assertion "suited her best" and "no." "She" has gotten what she wants, but the divide between "no" and "where" emphasises that the answer to "should I have?" is an emphatic negation. This "no" prompts the next query: "where to lean my face?"

Similarly, if punctuated interrogatively, the "had I words" of line ten might speak to a more loquacious past, or a halcyon vision of just such a past. The open-endedness of the line is corroborated by the uncertainty it articulates: "had I words I could confidently write." Again, the unseen and unknown "you" aims at silencing, even as the questions persist.

⁴ Paul Verlaine, *The Cursed Poets*, trans. Chase Madar (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003), 79.

Et nunc et semper et in secula or "is now and ever shall be" is usually part of a longer Christian prayer, namely: "Glory be to the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be World without end. Amen."

⁵ Via part three of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Joan Stambaugh traces out these categories in *The Other Nietzsche* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 25.

⁶ Daniel W. Conway stresses the need to distinguish Nietzsche's decline from the specificity of his *décadence*, arguing that the philosopher defined the latter as "a degenerative psychological condition"; see his *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For Conway, this condition "characteristically manifests itself as a growing disparity between the cognitive and volitional resources at one's disposal; a yawning chasm that divorces intention from accomplishment; the widening gulf that separates what one wants from what one needs; and, most succinctly, an irreversible weakness of will" (14-15).

⁷ "I am a child of my age as much as Wagner" Nietzsche writes in his preface to *The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*, adding, "i.e., I am a decadent." Though acknowledging that "the philosopher in me struggled against" this realisation, he also states: "My greatest preoccupation hitherto has been the problem of *décadence*" (Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, 3rd Ed. [Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911], xxx).

⁸ Andrzej Zawadski considers Levinas the first to use the metaphor of weakness as a critique of philosophical transcendence; see his *Literature and Weak Thought* (Frankfurt: PL Academic Research, 2013), 22.

⁹ Richard A. Cohen, "Introduction: Humanism and Anti-Humanism—Levinas, Cassirer, and Heidegger," in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), vii-xliv.

¹⁰ According to Jon R. Snyder, the uprising is similarly pivotal, if not foundational, for Gianni Vattimo; see his "Translator's Introduction" in *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), vi-lviii, ix.

¹¹ See particularly, Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 17-18. I discuss Levinas's vexatious relationship with art, one of dependency upon literary metaphor whilst eschewing the value of the same, in *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowing, Laughter, Boredom, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 16-19. An excellent source on this topic is Gerald L. Bruns, "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206-34.

¹² Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 67. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 8.

¹³ Arthur Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" was penned in a letter dated 13 May 1871 (Arthur Rimbaud, *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 113.

¹⁴ *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (NY: Grove Press, 2008) was originally a doctoral dissertation submitted under the title, “Essay on the Disalienation of the Black.”

¹⁵ For one strong example of this resistance to Levinas’s radical passivity, see Robert J. C. Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 19-42, 36-39. With colonial history in view, Young argues that the resolute, irresolvable “foreignness” of Levinas’s other insidiously augments a history of racial otherness.

Cathy Park Hong offers a wonderful attack on the privileged mythology of post-identity in contemporary vanguard literature in “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* 7 (2014).

¹⁶ As examples, witness Denise Riley’s impressive interrogation of identity and categories in *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and *‘Am I That Name?’: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). In the latter, Riley echoes Levinas’s terms, ruminating upon how best to answer the question: “At this instant, am I woman as distinct from a human being?” (6). Her historically-oriented discussion of the vexatious yet ultimately necessary category that is “woman” is nuanced and comical, as when she asks: “Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror?” And answers: to do so is an “impossibilit[y]...far from the aims of feminism” (6).

¹⁷ A typical, reactionary Nietzschean diagnosis of the risks of weakness, which is textually sandwiched between arguments against *décadence*, reads as follows:

‘Equality’, a certain actual rendering similar of which the theory of ‘equal rights’ is only the expression, belongs essentially to decline: the chasm between man and man, class and class, the multiplicity of types, the will to be oneself, to stand out—hat which I call *pathos of distance*—characterizes every *strong* age. The tension, the range between the extremes is today growing less and less—the extremes themselves are finally obliterated to the point of similarity.... (*Twilight of the Idols* 91)

¹⁸ While there is anecdotal agreement and poetic evidence that the ideologies of May ’68 influenced Mendelssohn, there is no certain proof that she was in Paris during the uprising. Tom Clark’s *Edward Dorn: A World of Difference* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002) quotes Jennifer Dunbar Dorn discussing “a small contingent of Essex academics” travelling across the English Channel in the spring of 1968. A member of their party allegedly sent a manifesto-style telegram to the *Times*, stating that the journey was undertaken as a show of support for the Parisian uprisings. Dunbar Dorn specifically identifies “Anna Mendelssohn” (the spellings of her name are incredibly variegated) as among their number (39). At this time, the American poet Ed Dorn was lecturing at the University of Essex. In 1987, Mendelssohn and Dorn appeared together in the first issue of an ephemeral vanguard journal, *The News* (1987).

In a letter dated 4 May 1987, Mendelssohn describes travelling by car to Paris with Ed Dorn and three or four others (SxMs109/3/C). Like Dunbar Dorn, she makes no reference to an arrival, an omission that may be rectified as more of Mendelssohn’s archive is explored. At present, this omission is replicated in two under-researched texts that describe the mass exodus of British students to Paris in May ’68. Mendelssohn’s associates are named as protesters, and Mendelssohn is once loosely identified as among the contingent by the appropriately pseudonymed “Tom Vague.” See Tom Vague, *Anarchy in the UK: The Angry Brigade* (London: AK Press, 1997), 20; and Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain’s First Urban Guerilla Group* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 19. Another confusing source: in 1972, a televised documentary on The Angry Brigade states that Mendelssohn was in Paris in 1968; though she is interviewed, she is not asked, and does not volunteer any information about that event (see footnote 57).

At the end of this essay, I’ll point to a fifth source that maintains this ambiguity. But in the meantime, a sixth: an email exchange with Mendelssohn’s close friend Lynne Harries (May 16/17 2016) confirms that Mendelssohn never spoke of direct involvement in May ’68. But then again, nor did she outright deny being there.

¹⁹ Mendelssohn was born on June 17, 1948. She began her degree at Essex in 1967.

²⁰ Though the tide is slowly turning, little is written on this era of student protest in England. Works such as Johnathan Green’s *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1999) go some

way toward bridging this gap. That said, a typical assessment of this period in England arises in *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) where Lin Chun describes how, with the exception of Scottish R. D. Laing, intellectual and political influences of this period were all “imports,” including Mao, Fanon, Althusser, and Che Guevara. Noting that the London School of Economics and universities at Essex, Hornsey, Hull and Birmingham were key sites of late-sixties student protest, Chin nevertheless sums up rather dispiritedly: “British society was the only major industrialised society which did not generate a competitive militant student movement, nor a vigorous and coherent theory for such a movement” (93; 87-88).

An extant Essex alumni website offers a detailed account of university protests from 1967-1969, including references to coverage in the national papers (<http://www.essex68.org.uk/>).

²¹ Mendelssohn refers to these events in her notebooks and correspondence; “the fourteenth flight” in *Viola Tricolor* (Cambridge, UK: Equipage, 1993, unpaginated) is dedicated to Godard.

²² These journals include *Strike!*, *Frendz*, and possibly Tariq Ali’s *Black Dwarf*.

²³ There are almost two dozen portions of this memoir, roughly dateable from the late seventies to the early nineties; I have edited a portion entitled *What a Performance* (1987) that is forthcoming with the “Little-Known Documents” section of the *PMLA*. The entirety is episodic, and discrete sections are identifiable by stationary, type fonts, inks, and/or pagination, as well as a degree of narrative continuity and closure. “I thought I had all the answers” is untitled, typed, and contains very minor edits in Mendelssohn’s hand. In the passages provided, smaller spelling errors and typos are silently corrected (SxMs109/1/B/1/5).

²⁴ In each instance in this typescript, “each other” is rendered as “eachother”.

²⁵ In the original, this sentence reads: “I’d slowly progressed from world politics to local politics to city (London) politics to local politics”.

²⁶ Ian Bone discusses this trip to Wales, or more specifically, Oxwich Beach, Gower, Swansea, in his *Bash the Rich: True Life Confessions of an Anarchist in the UK* (Bath: Tangent Books, 2006), 45.

²⁷ SxMs 109/1/B/1/5.

²⁸ There are numerous references to Emmanuel Levinas in Mendelssohn’s papers. For instance, a quote from his *Collected Philosophical Writings* is jotted down on a scrap of paper in SxMs109/5/B/2/58.

²⁹ SxMs 109/1/C/4.

³⁰ See files SxMs 109/1/C/1-3 (1958 to 1968).

³¹ In the nineties, Mendelssohn published three collections with Rod Mengham’s Equipage Press: *Viola Tricolor* (1993), *Bernache Nonnette* (1995), and *Tondo Aquatique* (1997). A fourth, *The Day the Music Died* (1993) was a very limited edition. In 2009, her final chapbook, *Py.*, appeared with Oystercatcher Press.

³² Mendelssohn’s first anthology entry was for Wendy Mulford’s *The Virago Book of Love Poetry*, a collection encompassing female poets from Sappho to Alice Walker (London: Virago Press, 1990). Denise Riley included Mendelssohn’s poetry in *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1992); in 1996, Mendelssohn and Riley appeared in Maggie O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2nd ed. 2006). Mendelssohn is included in Iain Sinclair’s *Conductors of Chaos: Poetry Anthology* alongside J. H. Prynne, Drew Milne, and Caroline Bergvall (Picador; 1996). Finally, in 2004, Mendelssohn contributed to Rod Mengham and John Kinsella’s *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (London: Salt Publishing); Lynn Hejinian, Peter Riley, Marjorie Welsh, and Stephen Rodefer are among the poets in this volume.

³³ It is likely that she met or knew of some of these individuals whilst at Essex.

³⁴ The attacks for which the Stoke Newington 8 were ultimately held accountable occurred between 1970 and 1971, and are outlined in Gordon Carr’s *The Angry Brigade* (54-57). People laying claim to the name “The Angry Brigade” continued detonating bombs as late as 1984. For the communiqués and another timeline of Brigade activities, see *The Angry Brigade: Documents and Chronology, 1967-1984*, ed. Jean Weir (London: Elephant Editions, 1985). In court, Mendelssohn admitted to contributing to communiqué 12.

³⁵ Mendelssohn was initially charged with credit card and cheque fraud on 21 August 1971. By November 1971, the charges were augmented to conspiring to cause explosions to endanger life or property. Mendelssohn stood trial with James Greenfield, John Barker, Hilary Creek, Christopher Bott, Stuart Christie,

Angela Weir, and Kate McLean. Mendelssohn, Greenfield, Barker, and Creek were sentenced; Bott, Christie, Weir, and Maclean were found not guilty.

³⁶ Mendelssohn's first legal name change took place on 10 March 1983, where she went from Anne Mendleson to Sylvia Grace Louise Lake. On 18 March 1997, she reverted, again legally, to Anne Mendleson, noting on the document that the English usage of her name was "Anna" (SxMs 109/1/9/1).

From 1998, her work is published under the name Anna Mendelssohn, and with respect for the final public preferences of this intensely private individual, it is under the name Anna Mendelssohn that her archive is identified.

³⁷ Lynne Harries, "The Northern Debutante: A Memoir of Anna Mendelssohn." MA dissertation, unpublished, University of East Anglia, submitted 2013, 16 (SxMs109/1/A/1).

³⁸ Mendelssohn's three children – Poppy, George, and Emerald – generously donated their mother's archive to Special Collections at the University of Sussex in 2010. Via negotiations with the British poet Peter Riley, I brought the archive to Sussex, and then spent some years writing funding grants for cataloguing. I was eventually fortunate enough to locate funds to hire an archivist, Simon Coleman, and to regularly work alongside him throughout his year-long contract. The archive was opened to the public in autumn 2015.

³⁹ Desbordes-Valmore, L'Isle-Adam, and "Pauvre Lelian" were added to the second edition; see Francis F. Burch, S. J., "Paul Verlaine's *Les Poètes Maudits*: The Dating of the Essays and the Origin of the Title," *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 752-55, 753. Critical interpretations of Verlaine's seminal text are surprisingly few. "*Les Poètes maudits* is among the most frequently cited literary studies of its period" writes Burch, but his brief article, now over five decades old, remains one of the only critical sources in English wholly devoted to this anthology (753).

⁴⁰ Symons writes a series of short essays in praise of Villiers de L'Isle Adam, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé in his 1908 edition, adding Jules Laforgue and fiction writers—Huysmans, for instance—into his mix. Also like Verlaine, Symons's second edition (in 1919) extends his authorial list.

⁴¹ I refer broadly here to the terms of Bataille's three-volume *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1988 and 1993).

⁴² In full, Bataille's quote reads: "in our day, with the custom of sacrifice in full decline, the meaning of the word, to the extent that it remains a drive revealed by *inner experience*, is still as closely linked as possible to the notion of a *spirit of sacrifice*, of which the automutilation of madmen is only the most absurd and terrible example." See "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Soekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 61-72, 67. The essay was originally published in 1930.

⁴³ "Guy Debord and the Problem of the Accursed," *Substance* 90 (28.3)(1999): 157-163. This piece was first published as the introduction to Debord's *Contre le Cinéma* (1964).

⁴⁴ The distinction here may well be historical, as Vigny writes self-consciously in the aftermath of the French Revolution, while Jorn writes in the social and ideological tumescence of the mid-sixties. The distinction is also blurry: the same year that Jorn writes his homage to Debord, the Situationist International (hereafter SI) publishes a "Questionnaire" defining its politics by negation and paradox: "The SI is neither a political movement nor a sociology of political mystification...the SI insists on a permanent revolution of everyday life." See "French Journals, #9," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 174-188, 178-79. Though surrealism is considered a direct (and certainly more immediate) influence, the central SI aim is discernibly Dadaist: to eliminate the distinction between art and life. In its use of paradox and negation, the SI is arguably still older in its origins, plausibly decadent.

Formed in Northern Italy in 1957, the SI united the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, which included Jorn, and Lettrist International, led by Debord. In 1962, the SI experienced a factional split, prompting the formation of a second SI, one that aimed to be more political. At this juncture, Debord rose to prominence, as attested by the now-canonical status of his charged *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). See also Peter Wollen, "The Situationist International," *New Left Review* 1 (1989): 1-18.

⁴⁵ Though the coinage of the term follows later, French fifteenth-century poet Francois Villon is often identified as the originator of the accursed poet existence: experimental poet, engaging in vice, dying in

ignominy, recognised posthumously. Villon was selectively translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Pound, and by the contemporary American poet Stephen Rodefer, meaning that vestiges of the accursed poet identifiably span more than five centuries.

⁴⁶ Wilde turned type—“an Oscar Wilde”—is a key site of uncontrollable contrariness. Elsewhere, Nordau explains that “a weak mind...chatters according to the current of the association of ideas, wanders in his talk, and neither knows himself what he wishes to arrive at, nor is able to make it clear to us”; see Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 2nd Ed., trans. unidentified (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 84.

⁴⁷ Having described the poet as the empire in its final decadence in “Langour,” Verlaine forswore the movement by 1891. M. S. Silk, “Nietzsche, Decadence, and the Greeks,” *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 587-605, 591.

⁴⁸ See Burch (footnote 37) regarding Verlaine’s production of the volume for money.

⁴⁹ Rita Felski, “The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch,” *PMLA* 106 (1991): 1094-1105, 1094.

⁵⁰ See footnote four.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), viii.

⁵² Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 6th Ed., trans. unidentified (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1975) (replica of 1906 edition).

⁵³ This quote is drawn from Möbius’s *The Mental Inferiority of Women: On the Mental and Physiological Deficiency of Woman* (1900), which proved an enormously popular publication; qtd. in Cinzania Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 119.

⁵⁴ Valentine de Saint-Point, “Manifesto of the Futurist Woman (Response to F.T. Marinetti),” 1912, rpt. in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 109-12.

⁵⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), remains an outstanding guide to this conundrum. Kathleen Fraser’s collection, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992), incorporates autobiography and essays to articulate the cultural positioning of the female experimental writer. Additionally, Elizabeth Frost’s *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003) considers the divide that continues between feminism and women’s aesthetic vanguard. For instance, the latter eschews the personal or confessional style that prompted the second-wave feminist recovery of more mainstream female writers.

⁵⁶ Esther Leslie, *Bouleversed Baudelairizing: On Poetics and Terror* (London: Veer Books, 2011). Leslie claims that through the 1990s, an invitation to the annual Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry (CCCP) was considered a mark of approval by the brotherhood in question. Though Leslie states otherwise, archival records show that Mendelssohn did participate in the 1991 CCCP, and that she was also included in the programme of the 1997 event (SxMs109/5/C/2 & 7); Mendelssohn’s correspondence with Rod Mengham suggests that she debated attending and reading in 1998 also, but eventually declined (SxMs109/3/A/1/34).

⁵⁷ Christina Rossetti and Marie Spartali are the obvious contenders for inclusion in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Griselda Pollock writes brilliantly on Elizabeth Siddall’s artistry in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁵⁸ Amanda Third, *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

⁵⁹ Morgan quotes from a source that is in turn, referring to a thirty-minute documentary that included an interview with Anna Mendelssohn and fellow activist (later, inmate) Hilary Creek. Conducted in Wales in 1972, the documentary was directed and televised by “World in Action” (1963-1998), a renowned BBC current affairs programme. In her interview, Mendelssohn’s discussion is purely political, and makes no mention of any romantic affiliations whatsoever (www.christiebooks.com).

⁶⁰ SxMs109/3/B.

⁶¹ This specific quote is drawn from the final page of a five-page typescript of Mendelssohn's memoir, likely written in the mid- to late eighties, and possibly titled, "what a poem." (SxMs109/1/B/1/37).

⁶² This prose work is a fair copy manuscript, lightly edited, and paginated in Mendelssohn's hand. She gives it a title page, writing the title centrally and "by Grace Lake" in the bottom right-hand corner. She identifies herself as entering her fortieth year in the text (SxMs 109/1/B/1/41). This work is one of many instances where Mendelssohn contemplates herself as martyred or cursed. For instance, in a letter to her sister and brother-in-law, she states: "I always felt hated" adding: "I always thought that one blessed rather than cursed, or if one did Curse it should be an ephemeral curse not one that speared its victim to produce it as a conquered demon or devil or anti-Christ or exemplar of Heresy" (SxMs109/1/E/1/6).

⁶³ "[M]ore formed" could be "more formal"; "organise things" could be "Organise things".

⁶⁴ Perhaps obviously, this expression is Verlaine's.

⁶⁵ In this instance, these three categories are met, respectively, by: 1) self-promoting old male communists, 2) female activists (preferably artists: Ethel Rosenberg was a singer and actress), and finally, 3) leftists on behalf of whose innocence the public rallied as it did not for Mendelssohn (decades-long protest and interrogation exonerated Rosenberg of her crime).

⁶⁶ This is a trope Mendelssohn refers to her in poetry, as in "'I don't want to be a lady novelist / In a summer dress" (*Implacable Art* 60). In her "womanifiasco numero una"—a manifesto she devised with her children in 1985—Mendelssohn offers another humorous rendition of the same, demanding to know when she, like the men she knows, will be entitled to a woman in a pinny or apron, who will wait on her hand and foot (Grace Lake, "MAMA: womanifiasco numera una," independently produced, dated "Cambridge 1985," a copy of it is held at the British Library).

⁶⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the term precedes Nordau and Lombroso; usages from 1895 stress "restless repetition of one and the same strain of thought" and fixation upon one's "own mental and moral ailments". *Note to Paul: 67 is a rewritten footnote*

⁶⁸ Consider the following, from Mendelssohn to her cousin Barry Benser: "The poet is always trying to heal what politics would tear asunder—the human spirit." Another letter to Barry illustrates her untenably feminist, yet anti-political position, via Mendelssohn's interest in the surrealist Gisele Prassinós:

She was a young poet like I was, and if there is any motive behind what I want to do it is only that I want it to be known, some day, that some girls are young poets and that society is not always, perhaps rarely, kind to us. I despair when everything is handed over to politics. Perhaps it is – perhaps that is the final Reality, but I dont want to subscribe to that final reality. (15.4.97; SxMs109/1/E/1/7).

⁶⁹ *La poétesse maudite* is not Mendelssohn's terminology. In Mendelssohn's poetry, "poetess" is used to signal feminine victimisation, as in "On Vanity" of *Tondo Aquatique*, which begins: "When a poetess is raped she loses her interior life. / In an attempt to understand the intensity of the pain / She seeks for her perpetrator in other forms" (unpaginated). A letter to poet Peter Riley illustrates how seriously Mendelssohn took the term, and the gendered difficulties of writing: "How much of a woman one is as a writress, a poetess (not a poet – it is strange how difficult it seems, or has seemed to be to communicate the difference that is not necessarily any less literary and/or intelligent) has not been helped by anyone deflecting me from poetry" (15.1.[no year], SxMs 109/3/A/1/52). Elsewhere, Mendelssohn describes the pragmatism of being a feminist, particularly in sixties Britain; again, her terms border on the persecutory, as she suggests that women's poetry was "absent in the late 1960's, absent and illegal" (1.9.2008, SxMs 109/3/A/1/68).

⁷⁰ To this question, Mendelssohn adds: "How controlled I am, no-one normal could stand this being driven to distraction by sheer prejudice" (1.9.2008; SxMs 109/3/A/1/68).

⁷¹ Other tactics included sit-ins, occupations, debates, and lecture disruption. The campaign began after the March 1968 protest against the Viet Nam war in London, which involved over 10,000 protestors (news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/17/newsid_2818000/2818967.stm). It was hoped that this protest would spark a series of events in England comparable to what took place two months later in France (Carr, *The Angry Brigade*, 32-33). Many Essex students were at this march; alumnus Chris Ratcliff recalls Mendelssohn as present among their number (email dated 17.05.2016).

⁷² In England, a 2/2 is earned for marks between 50 and 60%. Given that the British do not use the full range of marks (it is very unusual for students in the Arts and Humanities to earn anything above an 80), a 2/2 amounts to a low pass.

⁷³ SxMs109/3/A/1/18.

⁷⁴ A single Mendelssohn notebook (again, there are nearly 800) will include notes on Forster, Boccaccio, Cromwell; another on Auden, Tillie Olson Benjamin Brittan, the letters of Peter Plymley, Waugh, Longfellow, and extracts from *The Sunday Times*.

⁷⁵ Mendelssohn did not complete her degree in comparative studies at Essex, leaving the university just months before her final exams. She began another degree in fine art in at the University of Sheffield Hallam in the early eighties; no evidence exists that she completed that degree before she started at Cambridge in 1984. She makes frequent mention of attempting to apply for degrees in London and Oxford whilst in prison; evidence exists that she embarked upon a Foundation Year Art programme at what is now called the University of Anglia Ruskin in or about 1978 or 1979.

⁷⁶ 20.8.90; SxMs109/3/A/1/51.

⁷⁷ Lynne Harries, "The Northern Debutante," 17-18.

⁷⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

⁷⁹ Nietzsche's writings indicate an incorrigible arrogance even as he signed his late letters, "The Crucified" (Silk, 600). These polarities have contributed to his legacy as "the isolate and embattled individual" (R. J. Hollingdale, "The Hero as Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 71-89, 87).

⁸⁰ Natalie Adamson and Toby Norris, "Introduction," in *Academics, Pompieri, Official Artists and the Arrière-Garde: Defining Modern and Transitional in France*, ed. N. A. Adamson and T. Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 1-25.

⁸¹ According to Matei Calinescu, the Italian term *decadentismo* emerged in the twentieth century, and refers to the cultural transition from nineteenth-century romanticism into, and including, modernism. See Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 168, 178, 212-13, 218-19.

⁸² Consider the stunningly po-faced: "Any...claim to possess the only possible reality contradicts the nihilistic principle of the infinite interpretability of the world, and must be refuted" (Jon R. Snyder, xxv).

⁸³ This is a sentiment espoused by Vattimo: "The ruling concepts of metaphysics...turn out to be means of discipline and reassurance that are no longer necessary in the context of our present-day organisation and capability of technology" ("Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 43). And in the same volume, Franco Crespi asks: "is the *weak* position to remain fatally the thinking of the elite and therefore still a form of Enlightenment?" ("Absence of Foundation and Social Project," 253-68, 255). Crespi answers affirmatively (if implicitly), arguing that weak theory is possible because of "the improvement in material structural conditions of present-day developed societies" (257). Whilst laying claim to a deeply ethical premise, by its own terms, weak theory does not pertain to at least two thirds of the global population.

On a much lesser scale, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is similarly problematic. Her otherwise outstanding diagnosis of the hermeneutics of suspicion, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," poses the following question: "How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?" See *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 141. An answer might be: how insularly radical are the circles in which you move that you do not regularly encounter peers or strangers who insist on the need to dress girl children in pink, or casually dismiss a male child's aggression as "boys will be boys"? While I take Sedgwick's point that solutions are needed more than self-perpetuating interrogations, part of the urgency she describes is tied to the fact that these offhand violences continue to define our every day.

⁸⁴ For an excellent source on this subject, see Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). Here François points out that contemporary theorists rely upon "supremely feminine virtues" among them, "not knowing (modesty) and not doing

(chastity)” (26). She challenges Levinas and Blanchot, among others, on their propagation of passivity as ethics, noting that within these discourses that refute mastery lies a risk of “hyperbolis[ing] as a mode of secret heroism the readiness to go unrecorded” (28).

⁸⁵ Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* dismisses decadence outright, and Renato Poggioli’s similarly titled and seminal theory nods all-too-briefly in its foundational direction.

⁸⁶ See Vincent B. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁸⁷ Peter Carravetta, “Introduction,” in *Weak Thought*, ed. Vattimo and Rovatti, 1-38.

⁸⁸ This untitled poem is drawn from the same unpaginated collection—*Tondo Aquatique* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997)—as the sonnet with which this essay begins. It begins with an epigraph from *An Duannaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, trans. Thomas Kinsella, ed. Sean o Tuama (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, UK: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1981).

⁸⁹ Alessandro Del Lago, “On the Ethics of Weakness: Simone Weil and Nihilism,” in *Weak Thought*, ed. Vattimo and Rovatti, 111-37.

⁹⁰ Charles Altieri, “Avant-Garde or Arrière-Garde in Recent Contemporary Poetry,” *Poetics Today* 20 (1999): 629-53.

⁹¹ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012).

⁹² Mendelssohn, “never beiger,” *Tondo Aquatique*, n.p.

⁹³ Renato Poggioli argues that it is only with Rimbaud, during the Paris Commune, that we see the two vanguards in simultaneous operation, an assertion against which Calinescu takes legitimate umbrage (Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 113). Kristin Ross scathingly and discerningly discounts scholars’ ongoing need to determine, once and for all, what Rimbaud factually did between March and May 1871 with the following: “Even to pose the question in this form reveals the anxiety of the empiricist working in the service of reductivism—a reductivism that most likely has political (recuperative) motivations”; see her *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2008), 32.

⁹⁴ SxMs109/2/D/5.

⁹⁵ Other poems that reference this slogan include Mendelssohn’s “the fourteenth flight” in the unpaginated collection, *Viola Tricolor* (1993). As the poem moves to its conclusion, she describes being psychologised, watched, judged by “the fidgeting tax payer” or the “uniform and corporate and attuned.” This broad-based “they” observes our speaker, eventually curbing their remarks “upon how various paving stones seem to make me jump up and down”. The paving stones inspire a cartoonish rage, suggesting that the legacy of May ’68 retains its influence. But, by poem’s end, the same speaker comments: “beats me that’s all those closed mouths [...] had to organise a political justification for writing poetry”. As previously noted, the poem is dedicated to Godard.

⁹⁶ This achingly beautiful poem is published in *Bernache Nonnette* (1995) and *Out of Everywhere* (1996; 2006). Evidence suggests that Mendelssohn may have composed this poem over a period of thirty some years.

⁹⁷ 2.3.87; SxMs109/3/A/1/3.