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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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“In the nineteen-seventies, when I was a teenager and had fantasies of growing up to be a writer, I didn’t dream of being a novelist or a poet. I wanted to be a critic,” Daniel Mendelsohn wrote in his 2012 “Critic’s Manifesto.”<sup>1</sup> And he became one. After being a freelance reviewer for *QW*, *NYQ*, *The Nation*, or *The Village Voice*, Daniel Mendelsohn started contributing to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*. In 2019, he was named Editor-at-Large of the *New York Review of Books*, a magazine which he recently referred to as “my home.”<sup>2</sup> Three collections of pieces (*How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken*, in 2008; *Waiting for the Barbarians. Essays from the Classics to Pop Culture*, in 2012; and *Ecstasy and Terror. From the Greeks to Games of Thrones*, in 2019) have been published over the years, gathering texts on classical or modern literature, reviews of films, television series, theatrical or opera productions, essays on various aspects of US culture, as well as autobiographical pieces. All of those essays demonstrate how seriously Mendelsohn once embarked on the career that made him dream as a teenager, when he ravenously devoured each copy of *The New Yorker* in his parents’ Long Island home and learned, passionately learned from those critics whose “long and searching essays,” whose “erudite and penetrating discussions” as well as “sustained, cantankerous, and searching critique” set an example and taught him how to “think *critically*.”<sup>3</sup> The erudition, the passion, the intellectual rigor, and the commitment to their task which his favorite critics displayed educated his mind as well as his taste then, and allowed him to understand that art and culture help to live one’s life: because at their highest, poetry, drama, fiction and nonfiction, music, architecture weave together “beauty and tragedy,” they allow us to suddenly glimpse the fleetingness of our existence, the fragility of the traces we leave, the ever-looming threat of loss which we fight with our touching endeavors to retrieve and to remember.

Mendelsohn often pays a tribute to the critics who once showed him the way as well as to the mentors and editors whose guidance was instrumental, and with whom he learned his craft and honed his tools: critics are “above all people who are in love with beautiful things, and who worry that those things will get broken,”<sup>24</sup> he knows, borrowing Tennessee Williams’s metaphor. They write about those beautiful things both in order to share them and in the hope of trying to preserve them. If Mendelsohn is one of those critics and essayists who has been relentlessly analyzing and transmitting the works of others, he also knows that in doing so, he “always end[s] up writing [his] own intellectual autobiography.”<sup>25</sup>

The present collection of essays deals with Daniel Mendelsohn’s work as a memoirist, but as the quotation above suggests, essay writing and self-writing are closely connected: being a critic allows him to map out his own life, both as an intellectual and as a specialist of Greek and Latin languages and civilizations, which he teaches at Bard College; conversely, being a memoirist gives him the opportunity to delve into the personal and family reasons accounting for his taste for the past, for history and archeology, for lost worlds and for books which have survived them, for awaiting mysteries and incomplete stories. That Daniel Mendelsohn studied the classics and wrote his PhD on Euripidean tragedy<sup>6</sup> shines throughout his work: Greek culture, language, and literature shaped his mind and greatly defined his approach to the world. Whether in his memoirs, in his essays, or in his interviews, Mendelsohn often explains that he grew up developing a fascination for his maternal grandfather, Abraham Jäger, a man who emigrated to the United States as an adult and who thus preserved his European memories, his Ukrainian past as well as its dark secrets. A lover of languages which he juggled dazzlingly, a brilliant storyteller, this elegant, colorful man fostered in his grandson the love of history, on a worldwide scale as well as on a personal one, a passion for the past and for the way it reaches into the present, and a concern for family heritage and transmission. Studying Greek and Latin satisfied Mendelsohn’s fascination for what he often calls the architecture of language, for the precision and exactitude of grammar in which he takes so much delight, for the magic light that etymology casts on words which we normally do not question, suddenly giving them meaningful depth. If, after his PhD, he gave up his initial desire to become a full-time academic classicist, he has nevertheless remained an *everyday* classicist, a critic, and a writer whose practice has kept being inspired and fed by his erudite and ever-renewed knowledge of classic culture and storytelling. A firm believer that Greek literature and mythology are “classic in the first place precisely because they have always been, and will always be, deeply relevant to, and incomparably illuminating of, human experience,”<sup>27</sup> Mendelsohn never ceases to marvel at how the narratives,

poems, and myths that have crossed the centuries still compose the heart of Western culture which they continue to subtend, structure, and inspire—a presence that his essays subtly analyze—and how they help him understand his own doubts and choices as a man.

In March 2019, the researchers of the LERMA,<sup>8</sup> at Aix Marseille Université, welcomed Daniel Mendelsohn. A whole day, in Aix-en-Provence, was devoted to the study of his memoirs, and the second day was spent pleasantly strolling around the ancient city-center of Arles, recording an interview, while photographer Andres Escobedo was fixing the moment with his Hasselblad camera. The present volume, which includes the illustrated interview, the papers presented during the conference, as well as a few essays added by other French researchers, testifies to the importance of the reception of Mendelsohn's work in France, where his memoirs find an ever-growing readership and receive much critical attention as well as recognition (the French version of *The Lost, Les Disparus*,<sup>9</sup> was granted the Prix Médicis Étranger in 2007). The volume also reflects Daniel Mendelsohn's immense generosity, his readiness to respond with depth and humor to each presentation, and the luminous conversation he offered us in Arles. If the essays published here focus on his memoirs, reading Mendelsohn's whole work easily allows us to understand to what extent it blurs potential frontiers between criticism, teaching, and self-writing: they all demonstrate that writing about oneself is above all a way of showing how this self is connected both to a vast cultural and literary world which is part and parcel of the development of any individual and to ancient knowledge, myths, and stories whose power layers and layers of history have not taken the edge off. Today, in the booming field of nonfiction, Daniel Mendelsohn is unique in the way he speaks of the necessity, but also of the passion, to transmit such a heritage through teaching (his memorable 2011 seminar on Homer's *Odyssey* is at the heart of his third memoir), translating (C. P. Cavafy's complete poems,<sup>10</sup> and a new translation of the *Odyssey* is currently on the way), and essay-writing and memoir-writing, which, to him, are one and the same.

In his first memoir, *The Elusive Embrace. Desire and the Riddle of Identity*, published in 1999, Mendelsohn discusses the discovery of his homosexuality, his life as a gay man in New York City and his other life as a father in a suburban home, as well as a family mystery dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, a mystery whose exploration teaches him the universal need for storytelling, which sometimes demands secrecy and lying, reconstruction of facts, and narrative craftsmanship. The memoir is also teeming with passages in which Mendelsohn, a classicist, a professor, and a critic, quotes from and comments on classical texts by Euripides, Sappho, or Sophocles. If the book was too hastily considered as a gay memoir, Nicolas Pierre

Boileau, in his essay, deftly demonstrates that the text develops “as if gayness was in fact a negligible aspect of the author’s life,” and subtly disappoints the expectations of the reader familiar with the genre by moving away from gay memoirs’ purple patches as well as from (easy) psychoanalytical and/or queer interpretations. In this “gay man’s odyssey,” Boileau advances, Mendelsohn explores his multiple selves and “reinstates the other of his own identity,” using the same only as “an instrument designed to highlight the presence of the other” in “a logic of supplementation rather than harmony.” Analyzing how the image of the looking-glass and the reflection it offers are used throughout the book as irreducible paradoxes, Boileau shows that Mendelsohn portrays himself as “a paradoxical author, both memoirist and essayist, both classic and contemporary, both direct and indirect, situated both at the center of gay and straight lives, therefore marginal to both gay and straight lifestyles.” From the beginning to the end, he subtly weaves together his self-portrait, his exploration of the mystery fostered by his maternal family and his literary reflections, until the reader finally sees the connections and marvels at the brilliant patterns of echoes and links which are progressively sketched as the memoir develops. Such an elaborate and yet remarkably luminous combination of Mendelsohn’s academic, journalistic, and autobiographical approaches to his subject was to become his signature.

In 2006 came *The Lost. A Search for Six in Six Million*, his second, dense, dark, desperate memoir which traces the long, thorough investigation Mendelsohn carried out in order to try and understand how six members of his maternal family—his great-uncle, Shmiel Jäger, as well as his wife and their four daughters—were exterminated during the period of the Holocaust by bullets (1941–1943) in central Europe. Laurence Benarroche’s essay focuses on Bronia, the Jägers’ youngest daughter who, precisely because of her age, was probably murdered along with other most vulnerable Jewish inhabitants of Bolechow during the first *Aktion*, and who thus embodies the whole tragedy. Because so few traces remained of her, because so few survivors even remember her, the one photograph of the ten-year-old little girl, smiling between her two parents, which her family still possesses, appears several times in *The Lost*, testifying to Bronia’s fragile yet powerful presence. Benarroche analyzes the “haunting quality” of the picture and offers a larger interpretation of how the book, which includes the reproduction of old photographs as well as of recent ones taken by Mendelsohn’s brother Matt, articulates text and uncaptioned as well as unexpectedly positioned images. If, in *The Lost*, the reader follows Mendelsohn’s harrowing quest over four continents chronologically, watching him gathering information, rejoicing at sudden breakthroughs and losing courage in merciless dead ends, they also listen to him retrospectively analyzing what it means for a family, indeed for a whole

people and a whole culture, to be wiped off the surface of the earth and to leave no traces except in the memory of rare and scattered witnesses, all of them old, some of them still shell-shocked and dumbfounded, some of them plainly reluctant to talk, others still willing to remember but, for different reasons, failing to fulfill the investigator's expectations. In his essay, Yves-Charles Grandjeat chooses to meticulously analyze the "plurilingual fabric" of Mendelsohn's narrative, the "journey through translation" he invites his reader to embark on: because Mendelsohn is faced with several witnesses expressing themselves in different languages which, sometimes, require the mediation of an interpreter, because he spends years moving within "a heteroglot space of foreign languages and alien discourses," because he decides, on a structural level, to "filter" his narrative "through a biblical text which acts as a hermeneutic frame and as a shaping subtext" and which is studied along with the interpretations of two exegetes, he ultimately discovers the absence of any stable, original text, the plurality of any story, the relativity of any truth. In spite of the relentless investigation, the Lost remain lost, and yet the book has "ma[de] space for the dead," Grandjeat concludes. Finally, Marc Amfreville takes up the challenge of reading how *The Lost* resurfaces in Daniel Mendelsohn's following memoir, *An Odyssey*, how "the harrowing night of the Shoah and the redeeming day of Greece" are paradoxically connected, how the "dark shores" of *The Lost* still haunt ("redux") the "solar book" that Mendelsohn dedicated to his father. If both books make it clear that it is the journey that matters and that reaching a destination often remains an illusory project, they also reveal the possibility of storytelling, managing "to weave the material of History and render transmission possible." Amfreville reads, in Mendelsohn's memoirs, the "death drive" that Derrida places at the heart of what he calls "archive fever" but also the redeeming drive of transmission.

Indeed, *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic* (2017), in which "a son go[es] in search of an absent parent," as Mendelsohn states in the beginning of his narrative, thus echoing Homer's hypotextual poem, is "a tale of survival" (Amfreville). Mendelsohn playfully tells the story of the twelve weeks during which his eighty-one-year-old father attended the seminar on the *Odyssey* which he taught at Bard College, then the Odyssean cruise they took on the Mediterranean, and finally his father's death which quickly followed, after a fall which sent him to hospital. Compared to the *Lost*, *An Odyssey* looks mistakenly short and light. And yet, an "educational memoir" dealing with a father's final lessons (both taught and learned) in old age, and with a son who is both a professor and a student, *An Odyssey* accomplishes the *tour de force* of delivering a thorough analysis of Homer's *Odyssey* while reflecting, in its very structure, the "ring composition" which the Greek poem is a perfect example of. It is not the first time that Daniel Mendelsohn has practiced

“ring composition,” since his first two memoirs already brilliantly used the technique—but in *An Odyssey*, he takes the reader behind the scenes and analyzes Homer’s narrative device for them as he simultaneously deploys it in his own text. The variety of the essays devoted to Mendelsohn’s third memoir in this collection testifies to its richness. Sara Watson studies it against the backdrop of the US tradition of self-writing, notably marked by the Transcendentalist emphasis on education, and shows how, by “constantly playing with our expectations, Daniel Mendelsohn reshapes the memoir into a Protean genre: the text is a meditation on time, on love, on family, a scholarly text, a travelogue, a collection of essays and an autobiographical reconstruction.” Arnaud Schmitt, for his part, analyzes the book through the fruitful notion of “patrimony” which, with its Rothian echoes, implies both father and son and, in Mendelsohn’s memoir, points at “how the son experiences fatherhood.” Recalling traditional patterns and expectations linked to the father figure in Jewish literature, Schmitt then proceeds to study “the father in the classroom” as well as the various disruptions which this presence entails as far as the relationships between father and son are concerned, of course, but also as far as narrative construction goes: debunking the assumption that “nonfiction is immune to narrative tension,” Schmitt’s essay casts a light on how Mendelsohn structurally uses the Greek notions which he unveils for his readers, *arkhê kakôn* (“the beginning of the bad things”) and “ring composition,” thus building up the final climax of the book, when Professor Mendelsohn discovers *another* father in his classroom. In a similar way, Sophie Vallas offers a close reading of *An Odyssey* by focusing on the way Mendelsohn uses the omnipresent image of the bed as a “sêma,” a Greek word which, he underlines, means both a “sign” and a “grave.” Several beds (the bed which the father, like Odysseus, once made with his own hands, the bed in which he finally lies as a powerless king, the beds which are the places for so many confessions and stories) allow Mendelsohn to weave multiple echoes into his memoir, echoes of the *Odyssey*, echoes of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (an omnipresent intertext in his work) in order to brilliantly display the playful power of storytelling. Finally, Jean Viviès goes back to Homer’s founding text, but, following in Mendelsohn’s footsteps, he indulges a digression and invites Erich Auerbach into his essay. Just like the German philologist in *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Viviès focuses on the scene in which Odysseus, home at last but still in disguise, is recognized by his childhood nurse thanks to the scar on his leg, a recognition interrupted by a long digression which brings much information as to both the circumstances of the wound and the very name chosen for the hero. Intertwining Auerbach’s and Mendelsohn’s readings of the scene, Viviès analyzes how fathers and sons, both in the *Odyssey* and *An Odyssey*, help each other,

learn together and from each other, exchange positions and roles, rediscover themselves and each other in endless dialectical relationships. “Reinterpreted by Mendelsohn,” Viviès contends, “the *Odyssey*, which Auerbach described as clear in its narrative economy, is so clear that it takes time to understand how profound it is.”

As if in direct link with Viviès’s reading, Mendelsohn very recently published *Three Rings. A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate* (2020), in which he goes back to the writing conditions of *An Odyssey* by sketching the portraits of three wanderers: Erich Auerbach, François Fénelon, and W. G. Sebald are all exiles, either by force or by choice, and also the authors of masterpieces which explore, in different ways, the question of storytelling by going back to Homer’s epic poem and to the inexhaustible themes it contains—exile and homecoming, separation and reunion, expectations and nostalgia, going through experiences and narrating them. But the three men were also teachers, Mendelsohn underlines, scholars, translators, men who, in their displacements, transported their immense knowledge which they turned into founding works raising the very issue of narrative. A pedagogue himself, Mendelsohn, who teaches the classics, who regularly criticizes the works of others and who takes his reader by the hand in his memoirs to help them understand both the secrets and issues which the books tackle and the way their authors write them, is drawn to those three figures of the past whom he connects in *Three Rings*, directly or indirectly, thanks to countless, brilliantly scattered elements. The essay is also a sort of “making of” of *An Odyssey*, of all of Mendelsohn’s memoirs as a matter of fact: by retracing the ways three writers who experienced displacement and loss came to produce texts in which readers, and other writers, would come as close as possible to understanding the complex relationship between living and representing, between life and narrative, Mendelsohn also draws the road map of his own memoirs. As French author Christian Salmon wrote in a recent review of *Three Rings*: “[Mendelsohn] turns erudition into an elevation, the art of storytelling into a spiritual initiation, exile into an expansion, into a decisive experience leading to a new exploration of the real, of the discovery of a new world.”<sup>11</sup>

It is to that ever-recommencing discovery of a new world, which Daniel Mendelsohn’s memoirs keep inviting his readers to, that the present volume intends to pay a tribute.

## NOTES

1. Daniel Mendelsohn, “A Critic’s Manifesto,” *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2012, reprinted in *Ecstasy and Terror. From the Greeks to Game of Thrones* (New York Review of Books, 2019), 363.



2. Daniel Mendelsohn, *Ecstasy and Terror. From the Greeks to Game of Thrones* (*New York Review of Books*, 2019), 377.
3. Mendelsohn, “A Critic’s Manifesto,” 363–367.
4. Daniel Mendelsohn, *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken*, “Introduction” (Harper Perennial, 2008), xvi–xvii.
5. Mendelsohn, *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken*, “Introduction,” xviii.
6. Daniel Mendelsohn obtained his PhD from Princeton University and published his dissertation as a book: *Gender and the City in Euripides’ Political Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. Mendelsohn, *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken*, “Introduction,” xviii.
8. The LERMA (Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone), at Aix Marseille Université, France, gathers researchers working on the literatures and cultures of the English-speaking world.
9. Daniel Mendelsohn, *Les Disparus*, translated by Pierre Guglielmina (Flammarion, 2007).
10. *C. P. Cavafy. Complete Poems*, translated by Daniel Mendelsohn, with an introduction and commentary (Knopf, 2009).
11. Christian Salmon, “Une ‘Hantologie’ de la disparition—à propos de *Trois anneaux* de Daniel Mendelsohn,” my translation (*AOC*, November 13, 2020), <https://aoc.media/critique/2020/11/12/une-hantologie-de-la-disparition-a-propos-de-trois-anneaux-de-daniel-mendelsohn/>.