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A Minor Poet?

Amy Levy: Critical Essays. Eds. Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010. 241 pp.

Reviewed by Sarah Minsloff, Columbia University

<1> Critics often align Amy Levy (1861–1889) with the eponymous speaker of her dramatic monologue, "A Minor Poet," and the association has seemed fitting. Not only did Levy occupy multiple minority identities (woman, Anglo-Jew, lesbian), but her self-construction as literary outsider foretold her utter disappearance from critical view following her death. When Levy began to attract attention in the 1980s and '90s, it was as an author who foregrounded her minority identity; feminist scholars, among others, embraced Levy as part of a widespread project of recovering silenced voices to the canon. From these origins in feminist, Jewish, and queer critique, scholarship on Levy has expanded in breadth and depth. Now, twenty-five years after Levy's re-emergence in the critical field, it is time to re-evaluate how we understand the "Minor Poet" whose status in the canon becomes less "minor" each year. It is precisely such a re-evaluation that is offered in Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman's *Amy Levy: Critical Essays*. Thoughtful in selection and rigorous in scholarship, this volume introduces new readers to Levy's life and works, refines and expands on the major themes of extant criticism, and considers entirely new ways of analyzing Levy's work.

<2> Hetherington and Valman have carefully organized the essays into three sections, each of which addresses a major aim of the volume. The first section seeks to expand the contexts in which we read Levy's works, focusing in particular on the social, political, and literary discourses in which she participated. A second section is dedicated to Levy's explorations of identity. More theoretical in approach, these essays seek to interrogate the very identity categories through which Levy was recovered. The final section opens a new field of inquiry focusing on Levy herself as an object of interpretation. Combining biography, social criticism, and close readings, these essays trace the co-opting of Levy herself—her life and literary influences—into various cultural and political narratives. These thematic divisions are porous. Essays often fit into more than one section, and other common themes—Levy's complicated political positions, her approaches to realism, her relationship with aestheticism—echo across the collection.

<3> The essays of the first section alternate between formal and historicist investigations. Gail Cunningham examines Levy's engagement with *fin-de-siècle* scientific discourses, arguing that Levy appropriates the Darwinian concept of "unfitness" in her short stories to define sensations of social exclusion. T. D. Olverson's reading of Levy's dramatic monologues "Xantippe" and "Medea" combines a rare comparative reading of these poems against the Hellenic texts they reference, with an examination of their social context: the male-dominated institution of classical education. If somewhat perfunctory in its conclusions, the essay skillfully highlights Levy's double critique of misogynist constructions of history and the educational institutions that perpetuate them.

<4> While Cunningham and Olverson reveal new contexts in which to read Levy's work, Nadia Valman re-frames a longstanding critical conversation: the relationship between Levy's feminism and the stereotypical—some would say anti-Semitic—depictions of Jews in her novel *Reuben Sachs* (1888). Valman's insight stems from the recognition of *Sachs* as a feminist revision of Christian conversion literature. Through a series of compelling comparative readings, Valman illuminates the ways in which Levy's novel appropriates and subverts tropes of this long representational tradition, particularly the figure of the morally elevated Jewess who struggles against misogynist oppression within the Jewish community. One of the most enlightening moments in the essay, however, examines Levy's major departure from conversion narratives. While such narratives stressed the certainty of a Jewess's fate (salvation if she converted, peril if she did not), Levy's protagonist is left facing a hazy and ambivalent future. Levy's text, Valman argues, encompasses not only the potentials but also the limitations of social and literary subversion.

<5> The second section of essays investigates what the editors call "Levy's much-vaunted complex identity" (19), though this designation requires some explanation. Examining and challenging the categories through which people are identified is a central theme in all of Levy's work, as well as the vast majority of criticism on that work. Essays in the first section scrutinize Levy's treatment of particular, historically specific identity categories; essays in the second section pursue her explorations of identity as a broad, theoretical concept. Levy's own specific subject positions remain important, but are approached as a means of analyzing the construction of the subject in language, relations between subjectivity and desire, and, most often, the ways in which one might imagine an existence that would fall outside clearly defined identity positions.

<6> Susan David Bernstein's essay on Levy's interest in the logic and language of vulgarity reads identity as a linguistic construction. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, John Ruskin, and Homi Bhabha, Bernstein traces the ways in which the stereotype of the vulgar Jew was deployed by Christian culture as a means of asserting Jewish difference. Levy reinterprets vulgarity as a privilege of the cultural minority, celebrating what she called "mongrel words" (142)—terms that gentiles will recognize only as proper English, but that carry a secondary meaning intelligible only to Jewish hearers. Combining her broad theoretical framework with close readings of Levy's texts, Bernstein argues that such vulgar language allowed Levy to construct a "diasporic identity" (136) through which Anglo-Jews could navigate between majority and minority cultures. Like Bernstein, Alex Goody probes Levy's transgression of identity categories. Her "Passing in the City: the Liminal Spaces of Amy Levy's Late Work" reads Levy's last volume of

poetry, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889), within the tradition of African-American "passing" literature. Through this unexpected comparison, Goody argues that Levy's speakers shift between subject positions (male to female, Jew to gentile) in the same way that protagonists of passing literature travel between poles of racial identity. Though the essay highlights the restless anxiety about identity that haunts these late poems, it obscures the fact that identity in many of these poems is not intermediate but irresolvable, or even impossible. The volume's fascination with ghosts, hallucinations, dreams, and other indefinite forms of being bespeaks an interest in a form of non-subjectivity that cannot be accommodated by the passing trope.

<7> The preceding essays have examined Levy as social outsider, whose works are necessarily predicated on questioning or subverting political and literary structures. The essays in the final section reverse our perspective, examining the various political and literary appropriations of Levy herself. Perhaps the most striking of these appropriations are those of critics who invoked Levy's suicide in an attempt to invalidate women's literary work. This is the subject of Lyssa Randolph's essay, a fascinating investigation of the interplay between scientific and literary discourses around female suicide at the end of the nineteenth century. Scientists commonly argued that the expenditure of intellectual energy could weaken women to the point of death, and literary critics played on these threats to deter women from attempting poetry or other forms of writing deemed particularly challenging. The suicide of an outspoken feminist and successful poet like Levy was thus often co-opted as proof of the dangers of women's creative and intellectual endeavors.

<8> *Amy Levy: Critical Essays* is a powerful argument for the value of Amy Levy to our understanding of late Victorian literature. Though thorough and engaging in themselves, these essays also outline a number of avenues for further investigation of Levy's work. Elizabeth F. Evans inspires interest in Levy's use of visual culture and spectacle; Goody suggests further exploration of urban space in Levy's works; and numerous critics point out that Levy's relations to various literary movements—aestheticism, late realism, modernism— remain largely unexplored. The volume is also an argument for the examination of other minority authors who remain as yet on the outskirts of the canon. Emma Francis considers Levy's role in the socialist circles of her day and in particular her relationship with Clementina Black; Lyssa Randolph draws a parallel between Levy and fellow poet Constance Naden. This focus is not incidental: in their introduction, Hetherington and Valman praise this "neobiographical approach" that draws women's writing into relation with the social circles and other networks in which they traveled (16). Attention to these networks—the various and interrelated communities in which social subjects are formed—suggests an exciting next step for those interested in Levy, or in identity criticism broadly.