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K A R E N W E I S M A N

Playing with Figures: Amy Levy and the Forms of Cancellation

Why play with figures? trifle prettily
With this my grief which very simply's said,
"There is no place for me in all the world?"
—Amy Levy, *A Minor Poet*

CAN AN ELEGY be a dramatic monologue? Can lyric effusion stand as narrative extension? In complicating her works' generic affiliations, Amy Levy addresses the relationship between subjectivity and the very ground in which it is instantiated; that is, she plays against a set of formalist and generic norms that at once hold out the tantalizing possibilities for, and the crushing limits of, her expressive resources. In short, this late Victorian writer cannot stop asking "Why play with figures?" even as she must assert her right, indeed her need, to play with them. The aesthetic dynamic in which Levy's figures live implicitly asserts their precariousness, to be sure, but it also comes to function as their only means of existence. For her, this labor really did become a struggle between life and death.

Amy Levy was a Jewish woman born in Clapham in 1861. She committed suicide in 1889, a couple of months before her twentieth-eighth birthday. Her posthumous fortunes have been slowly rising in the past few years as a bevy of scholars seek to rehabilitate the nineteenth-century canon, especially the substantial writings of women authors forgotten by time but not, fortunately, by the archive. Levy has supplied some focus for interesting discussion of Jewish alienation, feminist disenfranchisement, and social affiliation.¹ These have provided a welcome strengthening of interest in and understanding of her work, even as they have sometimes abetted a certain categorization about which Levy herself seems always nervous.² Her dominant struggle is defined by an anxiety over abstractions of the self, over the closure necessitated by definition and moral demarcation. For as I shall argue, two of her ostensible

dramatic monologues, *A Minor Poet* and *Xantippe*, are fully aware of the genre's self-questioning and self-subverting premises; they go one step beyond their inherent and necessary problematizations, however, finally to become negotiations of the reciprocity between poetic form and self-identification. The poems take suicidal speakers as their subjects, and become elegies, of a sort, for both their subjects and their suicidal author. Such delicacy in generic integration is accomplished with a careful eye to audience reception: Amy Levy plays with figures because she wants us to heed the necessary figurality of her vexed projections, but also because she strives to lay bare the empirical reality they insistently elide. And that empirical reality establishes the parameters of her voice, itself relentlessly vexed. She presupposes an audience even as she privately mourns, until speaking and mourning start to look like the same endeavor. Elegy and dramatic monologue qualify one another in these poems until they hover perilously close to the brink of cancelling each other's formal efficacy. The suicide, in this reading, has triumphed.

In the opening situation of both poems, the speakers announce disappointment with suicide attempts past. *A Minor Poet* situates its protagonist in the midst of a present attempt, while *Xantippe* follows the eponymous speaker's awakening to a day she had hoped to eclipse. Her realization that she is awake, alive, is joined to an immediate recognition of the conditions of her reception by the only "audience" she can claim:

What, have I waked again? I never thought
 To see the rosy dawn, or even this grey,
 Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come.
 The lamp burns low; low burns the lamp of life:
 The still morn stays expectant, and my soul,
 All weighted with a passive wonderment,
 Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn.
 Come hither, maids; too soundly have ye slept
 That should have watched me; nay, I would not chide—
 Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide
 In this last hour;—now all should be at peace.

(1–11)³

She "would not chide" now because this is her last hour of life, or so she hopes: can there ever be a real peace, however, between writer and reader; that is, can they constitute one another without diluting the other's putative meaning? Not entirely: the trochaic substitutions to this essentially blank verse opening, and the chiasitic emphasis on, for example, low burning in the fourth line, provide for a slow but insistent movement into an articulate rage that still would contain its own fury, if only because it has nowhere left to go. The lulling effort of the alliterative l's ("The lamp burns low . . .") seems to falter, indeed to bump into the alliterative w's, effectively cancelling any wistful hint of

lullaby. Such abrupt deflection of ease recalls us immediately to the illusion of transparent rapport: soothing voice here is prefatory to self-elegy, uttered within a forum that could only ever prescribe the speaker's demise. There is a high degree of line integrity throughout the entire poem, and an equally high number of medial pauses: urgently uttered it may be, but this effusion contains well-considered, even ponderous reflections. Here the pitch is high, as last words always are, and as final stands must be. Indeed, the intensity of the rhetoric derives from the sense that there is something profoundly at stake in this utterance, that the history of misconstrual and missed chances which she soon details have themselves come to stand as the essential meaning of her life, or at least as its dominant narrative. And since she speaks in this dramatic monologue so that she may offer a clarifying corrective to the mode in which she is familiarly understood, it is as if we are receiving a suicide note, one embodying a longed-for closure to the mystery of such enormous despair. Her bidding that "now all should be at peace" is followed by a reminder that mere "maids" define the life she utterly rejects: "What cared I for the merry mockeries / Of other maidens sitting at the loom? / Or for sharp voices, bidding me return / To maiden labour?" (33–36). The auditory ease of the merry mockeries of maidens is abruptly undermined by the trochaic retarding of the "sharp voices" insisting on "maiden labour." The opening call for "peace" lies somewhere between ironic platitude and cynical concession. Even in the opening situation of the poem, then, generic self-contradiction makes itself emphatically apparent. For in highlighting rapport, in moving beyond the mere internal, "overheard" status of lyric utterance, the dramatic monologue showcases the effort to make oneself understood—not simply to speak with internal clarity, but to make clarification a relational property of speech. She may be openly hostile or lovingly receptive, but the presence of an auditor guarantees the effort to make private effusion into a communicative act. As such, it speaks directly to the problem of circumscribing an audience.⁴ Xantippe's listeners take her for a harridan; she takes them as inept in their attentiveness.

A *Minor Poet* opens on a note of even greater desperation, with the Poet's moment of ingestion of some unidentified noxious substance. It then moves immediately to the memory of the Poet's friend, Tom Leigh, who had saved him from previous attempts and who becomes a fantasized—but obtrusively absent—auditor:

Just as the draught began to work, first time
 Tom Leigh, my friend (as friends go in the world),
 Burst in, and drew the phial from my hand,
 (Ah, Tom! ah, Tom! that was a sorry turn!)
 And lectured me a lecture, all compact

Of neatest, newest phrases, freshly culled
 From works of newest culture: "common good;"
 "The world's great harmonies;" "must be content
 With knowing God works all things for the best,
 And nature never stumbles" Then again,
 "The common good," and still, "the common, good;"
 And what a small thing was our joy or grief
 When weigh'd with that of thousands.

(6–18)

Like Xantippe, the Poet in his final moments recalls us to the alienating conditions of his immediate contexts, to the impossibility of a reception that can stretch beyond a normative ethos. The cacophonous repetition of "newest" in successive lines, for "newest phrases" and "newest culture," offers an emphatic and entirely cynical qualification to the insistence upon the "common good." Xantippe speaks to "maids" who are soundly sleeping, who could not care less, while the Poet speaks to a platitudinous, complacent friend who is not even really there. Now, the historical Xantippe was the wife of Socrates, and her reputation has come down to us in damning terms: she is the shrew who would lure her important husband away from his philosophic endeavor, insanely jealous, as the *Phaedo* has her, of his friends and colleagues. A *Minor Poet* does not name its protagonist, but it is clear (and would have been clear to a Victorian audience) that Levy has James Thomson, BV, in mind as an allusive point of reference. Thomson, now known largely as the author of the *City of Dreadful Night* (and to Shelleyans as one of the Victorian period's Shelley obsessives) was an alcoholic who essentially drank himself to death after a life of bad luck, hard drink, little recognition, and unrequited love. Levy was quite taken with his output—essays and poems alike—and pays extended tribute to him in her own essay, "A Minor Poet," where she calls him "a great human soul, horribly vital and sensitive in all its parts, struggling with a great agony" (506). I will be returning to the poem's points of contact with the historical Thomson. For my immediate purposes, I am interested in exploring the processes by which Levy's speakers offer rejoinders to their respective auditors, and so once again I turn to *Xantippe*.

Xantippe's maids are (at least initially) uncomprehending, but more important, they come to symbolize the very life to which she stands in putatively defiant opposition. Such tenacity, however, is complicated and compromised by the fact that her resistance soon takes the form of an angry identification with the very object of her scorn. While recasting her story in retrospect, the very story that would "explain" her essentially to the posterity we as readers inhabit, she still insists that acquiescence in the group can represent a singular

defiance. The resistance that takes the form of acquiescence is necessarily self-annihilating, however, and the poem foregrounds a tension that never does find resolution.⁵ Herein lies the contradiction in its negotiation of self and community. For having been rejected by Socrates, Xantippe consigns herself to the domain of his expectations:

then I grew
Fiercer, and cursed from out my inmost heart
The Fates which marked me an Athenian maid.
Then faded that vain fury; hope died out;
A huge despair was stealing on my soul,
A sort of fierce acceptance of my fate,—
He wished a household vessel—well 'twas good,
For he should have it!

.
I called my maidens, ordered out the loom,
And spun unceasing from the morn till eve.

(231–42)

When the maids become also the only figures to whom a life narrative can possibly be spoken—since nobody else is around to listen—her mode of self-exposure comes to allegorize the essential defeat of her existence: she is speaking to the visible spectre of her rejection, and yet that rejection defines the life narrative by which she is known—Xantippe, gossipy Athenian maid, with no life but the mere woman's work at the loom. Xantippe, having become “one of us” at last, is lost.

The self's absorption within communal norms is the obverse of the struggle against poetic solipsism, and it is solipsism that the dramatic monologue as form would seek to circumvent. However, refusing to let the self be swallowed by the social still does not guarantee its existence in isolation. In *A Minor Poet*, the speaker's world view further complicates the poem's already difficult negotiation of the idea of rapport:

I am myself, as each man is himself—
Feels his own pain, joys his own joy, and loves
With his own love, no other's. Friend, the world
Is but one man; one man is but the world.
And I am I, and you are Tom, that bleeds
When needles prick your flesh (mark, yours, not mine).
I must confess it; I can feel the pulse
A-beating at my heart, yet never knew
The throb of cosmic pulses.

(21–29)

Levy caricatures both a putative Romantic solipsism and a Victorian empathetic imagination. In rejecting absorption into a comprehensive cosmic impulse, indeed in refusing even to “feel” it, the Poet foregrounds a fear of death by abstraction, as it were, the swallowing of the self into the gaping mouth of attachment. He also resists what Alan Sinfield, describing Tennyson’s dramatic appropriations of his world, refers to as an “imperialism of the imagination.”⁶ In this, the repetition of “one man” after the caesural pause becomes a sort of pleading, auditory hammer, asserting an individuality even as it knocks itself right out. Such hapless striking is recalled several lines later when he complains that “The world’s a rock, and I will beat no more / A breast of flesh and blood against a rock” (71–72). He does beat steadily, however, more or less iambically, until the pentameter beats follow him to death. The resistance to social inductions via a rejection of universal sympathy is Levy’s challenge to one Victorian orthodoxy, indeed the very orthodoxy that could only subtly repel her. The bleeding when needles prick the flesh alludes, of course, to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock—a character much in vogue in Victorian writings—cries out, “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Indeed, the complication of an ideology of inclusiveness, so subtly offensive to minority cultures, stands here as one cause of isolation as effect. For if moving beyond the conceit of one man as world necessarily means that the world must collapse into the homogeneity of “one man,” that is, if the doctrine of sympathy finally translates into a self-cancelling absorption into the critical mass, then the beating of the heart must be at odds with the beat of the cosmic pulse. More narrowly, the regard for community here challenges the very process of self-definition.

In this, Levy seems to have, among other issues, James Thomson’s essay on sympathy very much in mind. Writing in opposition to a perceived dominant culture, Thomson rather angrily opines:

Yet immediately we analyze any charitable action of our own, however pure it may have been from common alliage of ostentation and subtle self-interest, we find that it was much less sympathetic than it at first appeared. It was not the result of a *feeling with* its object; but was rather the result of a process strictly analogous to the process used in solving an algebraic equation, almost as purely intellectual and non-cordial; dealing not with the very things in question, but with familiar abstract symbols that, until the solution is obtained, are scarcely on our thought connected, much less are identified, with those things themselves.⁷

Thomson is himself alluding to Thomas Carlyle’s attack on utilitarianism, especially Carlyle’s “Signs of the Times,” written in 1829, which complains that virtue has come to be treated as a “calculation of the profitable.”⁸ Likewise

Sartor Resartus sees Teufelsdröckh asking derisively, "Is the heroic inspiration we name Virtue but some Passion; some bubble of the blood, bubbling in the direction others *profit* by?"⁹ As J. B. Schneewind points out, utilitarianism in Victorian England was often misconstrued as essentially anti-art, indeed as the doctrine of cultural philistines. The Poet's dismissive regard for Tom is of a piece with the general theoretical complaints about, for example, Bentham, who is taken to task by Carlyle for "degrading man by making it appear that pleasure is his only proper goal, and in their [the Benthamites'] atheistic refusal to see the deeper spiritual meaning of life."¹⁰ When Levy gives to the Poet the rhetorical invective of the anti-utilitarians, she is motioning in the direction of the presumptions of high art and its putatively salvific powers. What she has him learn is that such facile presumptions are located in killing fields only.

Is sympathy always specious? Probably not: James Thomson drank himself to death. Amy Levy inhaled gas. The Poet of this poem likewise kills himself. Here is no sentimental assertion of self-reliance, or careful dance of psychic integration. The self-annihilation which is benevolent toleration by the community gives place to the self-annihilation which is solipsism, which in turn yields only the privacy of death. In Levy's poems, knowledge of the paradoxical nature of tolerance is negotiated within the strained relation between speaker and listener. Her speakers maintain a creative tension with their audience, but ultimately such creativity grounds a dance of death: they must situate their respective voices within the givens of their world, and so can only internalize, at least in part, the very norms they would inveigh against. Speaking within a forum that makes understanding possible, and doing so within familiar conventions, they project about audience constituency the very kinds of generalizations that enable them—that would be necessary to enable anyone—to speak in the first place. What does it mean to situate an audience, however, that of necessity misconstrues the speaker and that speaker's place in his or her world? More important, how does one constitute the self in relation to an audience that is simultaneously held in contempt *and* recognized as providing the only forum of value for that self? Xantippe and the Poet would know themselves principally as capable of brilliant utterance, of high thought rendered as something that is above all heard.

The problem of audience provides the most apt segue into the elegiac elements of the poems. For the point at which the dramatic monologues start to loosen their identities as monologues, as speeches with anyone actually there to listen, is the point at which elegy as genre begins to assert itself most vigorously. However, elegy too is profoundly qualified in these poems. For where monologue seeks a point of contact for the often self-divided soul, the elegy seeks to heal division in the solacing knowledge of a universally accessible principle of permanence. To be sure, any number of Victorian elegies take as

their *raison d'être* the contesting of such conventions, but it is important that they recognize the standard against which they position themselves.¹¹ The explosive rise of bourgeois sensibility in Victorian culture presupposes an idea of the public sphere, and the idea of public sphere in the case of elegy depends upon the notion of sympathy in its relation to community. In *Bearing the Dead*, Esther Schor has delicately traced the relation between sentiment and the historical fortunes of elegy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She notes that the status of elegy rises in tandem with the rise of status in the theory of sentiment, with sympathy for the dead serving as the focal point and origin of the function of sympathy generally. By the ascension of Victoria, though, utilitarianism claimed the authority of reason to dislodge the ascendancy of sentiment, "which lay too much at the feet of individual mourners engaged in event of sympathy." As such, "a culture of mourning became a cult of mourning."¹² Amy Levy enters the scene at a complicated juncture in this history, not yet at the modernist rejection of consolation outright, but already poised to distrust the possibilities for a recuperative closure in the experience of loss. Levy's mourning involves a considered ironizing of the conditions both of sympathy and rationality. For I would suggest that in a fundamental way, the poet experiences a failure even to get the death of the subject right; just as her characters have failed properly to die when we are initially introduced to them, so their posthumous lives as characters in the text refuse the contextualizations that would give at least generic integrity to the poetic efforts that embody them. No pastoral oasis of calm awaits their afterlife in Levy's texts: she could make no gypsy scholar out of the Poet, and no Lady of Shalott out of Xantippe.¹³ The Poet, never a name, is neither universal figure for poetic virtue nor rugged individualist in defiance of a heedless world. He speaks only to someone who makes an entrance in the epilogue of the poem, after the speaker has already died. Xantippe knows her maids do not genuinely comprehend her; the Poet crucially knows that Tom cannot in fact hear him. And the readers of Levy's poems receive their words within the familiar contexts for which they are popularly known: again, Xantippe as shrew, the Poet—easily suggestive of Thomson—as second-rate, debilitated, pathetic, indeed "minor" in all senses of the word.

The speakers address auditors about whom virtually nothing is known beyond their inability to listen. In this too, the poems throw into relief the vexing problem not only of dramatic monologue and elegy, but of the need to circumscribe any readership, any set of literary conventions for which common, generalizable modes of reception are necessary presuppositions. If there is no place in all the world for the Poet, from what ground is he read? And who are "we" that would grant the forum, who would give him life, in so receiving his words? For if Levy appropriates the one literary form that most obtrusively highlights the processes of reception, she does so with a deeply ironic

sense of the meaning of audience, especially of presupposing its constituents. The philosophical nostrums uttered by Tom and rejected by the Poet reflect a broad range of nineteenth-century platitudes, joining the rhetoric of Benthamite utilitarianism with the Protestant piety that enables Tennyson, for example, concluding his long elegy for Hallam, to look forward to the "one far off divine event to which the whole creation moves." Tom's "common good," snidely reiterated as the "common, good," serves in fact to remind us of just what our assumptions about commonality really mean, especially in the domain of the communal norms presupposed by the appropriation of certain kinds of literary conventions. Xantippe recalls that, as a youth, when she was instructed to return to appropriate woman's labor, she knew herself apart, separate, divorced precisely from "the common":

Were we not apart—
 I and my high thoughts, and my golden dreams,
 My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue
 That should proclaim the stately mysteries
 Of this fair world, and of the holy gods?

(36–40)

Xantippe is "apart," and the Poet is solitary. Both are dying, and both speak in the one forum that projects an audience, which they here must reject. And since they define themselves in the terms of an insistent hyperarticulacy, a unique propensity to create coherent thought, the rejection of audience is tantamount to a rejection of self. But since such rejection is only partial—continuing as they do to speak—they come to collude with the very objects of their resistance: they insist on being understood by creatures whose understanding—so they would have it—is meaningless.

Xantippe tells her maidens that after marrying Socrates, and learning that he "Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing / As the fine fabric of a woman's brain— / So subtle as a passionate woman's soul" (118–20), she was "wholly incredulous that Nature meant / So little, who had promised me so much" (131–33). What she consequently tries is the very strategy she attempts in the monologue, which is to say that she tries to talk:

At first I fought my fate with gentle words,
 With high endeavour after greater things;
 Striving to win the soul of Sokrates,
 Like some slight bird, who sings her burning love
 To human master, till at length she finds
 Her tender language wholly misconceived,
 And that same hand whose kind caress she sought,
 With fingers flippant flings the careless corn . . .

(133–40)

Talk does not work because there is no context, no ground, in which the speaker's words can be meaningfully construed; mediated by the only norms current, words become a "language wholly misconceived," which make for a speaker wholly and inexorably misplaced. The insistently alliterative f's and c's in the above-quoted passage stylistically recalls one of Levy's favorites, Swinburne, and his alliteratively melancholic—and very Shelleyan—concessions to a world gone awry. But Xantippe's singing is represented as a turn against Swinburnean lyric. She at first fought fate, hoping for kind caress; now Sokrates's hand, with flippant fingers, flings careless corn at her. The alliteration yields no lyric splendor, and no luxuriant sorrow: the final quoted line in particular is angry trochaic stomping, obtrusively resisting any lush aestheticizing of linguistic failure. This is courageously ugly vituperation, not pretty lamentation.

Both *Xantippe* and *A Minor Poet* turn on an essential misconstrual of language, a breach between the pure self-identity of experience and its transformation into persuasion, real communication. This dynamic radically alters the nature of the experience itself, because both Xantippe and the minor Poet breathe life only within their respective self-conceptions as articulate beings, as seekers after truth as expressed. The dislocation of audience is not merely incidental, then; it is instead dramatically constitutive of the subjectivity of the speakers, who, in being unable to position themselves vis-à-vis audience, find the meaning of utterance—or even of high art—itself highly qualified. In constructing themselves specifically as *speakers* who at once invite and defy the expectations of their auditors, their social alienation becomes only the outward signature of an essential self-alienation. In *A Minor Poet* in particular, the Poet's self-understanding depends entirely on his production of texts, and the textuality that inhabits what Shelley called "the intense inane" can mirror back only a void. If the speakers, then, can only march towards inexorable death, if the dramatic monologues become transformed into elegies that themselves resist the indulgences of the elegiac, then the central tensions of the poem speak directly to the ambivalence of their author's life. A Jewish woman in late Victorian England, Levy could only challenge the facile, totalizing assumptions about "audience" abstractly conceived, but what image of her, held by any audience, could possibly be reflected back? That is, knowing the utter spuriousness of a simple universalism, of a widely presumed homogeneity in readership, but knowing too her uneasy reliance on its dominant constituents anyway, she could become neither the singer in solitude nor a voice in the choric throng.¹⁴ If this circumscribes the potency of her voice, just as Xantippe retreats to her loom and the Poet retreats to his scornful solitude, then the relation to audience is best described as a *Liebestod*.

Indeed, if the process of self-definition is the work of self-identification,

then the difficulties of the two speakers are, as I have suggested, deeply resonant of the complications inherent in Amy Levy's own writing life. The constraints of a presumed homogeneity in every endeavor to which she attributed value were everywhere present. She was in one of the first classes at Cambridge University to admit Jews into its domains, and she wrote several essays that are highly suggestive of the subtleties, and more important, the pains, of difference. In "Jewish Humour," this amounts to a delight in the intimacy of particularized idioms, joined to a qualified regret that such distinctiveness is always under threat: "It is no new story, that the spirit of a nation should find expression in the utterances of its men of genius; nor that in those utterances the local, the accidental, the particular, should be subordinated to the universal" (522). But Henrich Heine is introduced as the Jewish poet who has "cracked the communal joke" (521–22), and she goes on to describe him thus: "The Poet stretched on his couch of pain; the nation whose shoulders are sore with the yoke of oppression; both can look up with rueful homorous eyes and crack their jests, as it were, in the face of Fortune" (522). But this is not a laughing matter. Recalling the enforced peripatetic nature of Jewish history, of exile and wandering from city to city, she insists that the Jew

hardly has left, when all is said, a drop of bucolic blood in his veins. He has been huddled in crowded quarters of towns, forced into close and continual contact with his fellow-creatures; he has learned to watch men's faces; to read men's thoughts; to be always read for his opportunity. If he could raise a laugh at his neighbour's expense when his neighbour's demeanour was such a matter of importance to him, who will grudge him the solace and the vengeance. (523)

Unelaborated as it is, the above serves as a powerful reminder of the subtle disaffections of assimilated Jewish life. If the Jew has not one drop of bucolic blood in his veins, then he is particularly suited, at least, to Victorian life, what with its increasing valorization of the city and its effects. But it also marks as alien a significant aspect of English literary history. This by itself is not the primary point of reference for Levy's alienation, but it does speak to the larger issue of literary and social community. For repeatedly in her poetry, and especially in the two dramatic monologues under consideration, she implicitly challenges the assumptions of reciprocity, consensus, and reception. More important, she highlights the inextricable relationship of the conditions of reciprocity to the meaning of one's subjectivity. As such, a constituent element of that subjectivity relies on the struggle to narrativize a life coherently, persuasively, and with expectation of receptive understanding.

The Levy characters who fail, who fail to find a reason to live, are the ones who find it impossible to make narrative out of lyric, to tell a story out of discrete moments of brilliance that all the same resist the effort to make them into

fully articulate artifacts. This again is resonant of Levy's own divided affiliation. For though her commitment to her writing is absolute, the coherence of that commitment within the structure of her life is never stably achieved. In one of her more unnerving short stories, she has a histrionic "Cohen of Trinity"—in her day, no less comical sounding, perhaps, than Levy of Cambridge—achieve literary fame before killing himself. Before the fatal act, he tells the story's narrator that finally attaining an audience has clarified very little for him: " 'They *shall* know; they *shall* understand, they *shall* feel what I am.' That is what I used to say to myself in the old days. I suppose, now, 'they' do know, more or less, and what of that?" (485). The narrator of *Cohen of Trinity* is somewhat hostile to Cohen and his pretensions, but Levy could discipline her own writing only so much. The self-ironizing gestures of the dramatic monologues speak to the profound isolation inherent in her complicated identification with the very literary inheritance she would claim. The Jew who has not a drop of bucolic blood in her veins is, in Levy, the Jew whose expressive resources depend upon a keen absorption of—and ability to transcend—the bucolic cadences that give English literary history one of its most prominent and defining features. For Levy there could be no facile division between literary affiliation and self-identity, but clearly between them there could be no final synthesis either.

The minor Poet would instantiate his subjectivity only by textualizing it, and since he is a *minor* poet, indeed a mediocre poet, he too can only become a figure of self-cancelling. In an inversion of Browning's "Andrea de Sarto," he is all passionate intensity, with none of the technical perfection. What remains of him, tragically, is the sense of himself as poet, indeed as Poet still. He describes himself first in the terms of an insufficiency of talent, and then in the terms of that talent's reception by the world.

A blot, blur, a note
 All out of tune in this world's instrument.
 A base thing, yet not knowing to fulfil
 Base functions. A high thing, yet all unmeet
 For work that's high. A dweller on the earth,
 Yet not content to dig with other men
 Because of certain sudden sights and sounds
 (Bars of broke music; furtive, fleeting glimpse
 Of angel faces 'thwart the grating seen)
 Perceived in Heaven. Yet when I approach
 To catch the sound's completeness, to absorb
 The faces' full perfection, Heaven's gate,
 Which then had stood ajar, sudden falls to,
 And I, a-shiver in the dark and cold,

Scarce hear afar the mocking tones of men:
 "He would not dig, forsooth; but he must strive
 For higher fruits than wheat our tillage yields;
 Behold what comes, my brothers, of vain pride!"
 (50–67)

Levy the minor poet, Levy who wanders in the City of Dreadful Night, breathes last life into the dead Poet whose speaking can only confirm the appropriateness of his death march. It is not that the Poet, like the older Wordsworth, sees "by glimpses now";¹⁵ it is rather that he defines his life in the terms of a narrative that in fact exists only as the possibility of lyric effusion, and even lyric effusion fails him utterly. He would cite the conditions of narrative continuity where there are assertions of instability only; that is, he "reads" the few bars of broken music, the mere fleeting glimpses of angel's faces, as the defining quintessence of his life. He cannot quite get the moment of rapture right, never mind translating it into the fabric of a coherent vision. What the Poet has are failed epiphanies, ones that do not integrate into the texture of his quotidian existence, but which yet define, in their very elusiveness, the conditions of his quotidian reality. He cannot reconcile his self-experience with his asserted self-identity because he constitutes himself in the terms of a textuality that he cannot contain. This is not a longing for a splendid actuality so much as it is a yearning for a pure lyric textuality, all ecstatic affirmation. He has glimpses, and only glimpses, of lyric. He would make of that lyric instantancing an autobiographical epic, the essential story of his life, a condition that is generically impossible. Browning's apposite passionate failures are men of an aesthetic intensity lost to the Poet, for unlike him they do hear the "sound's completeness," whatever their technical limitations:

Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
 Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me
 Enter and take their place there sure enough,
 Though they come back and cannot tell the world.¹⁶

Levy's Poet projects an existence of a life in writing that in fact can never be written. From his furtive and imperfect glimpses he projects a continuity, itself irrevocably impossible. He dies without benefit of genre.

What, then, is the suicide? The Poet, despairing, still remembers the sun which, in a prominent allusion to Thomson's fatal alcoholism, he "drinks in" greedily:

Ah, my sun!
 That's you, then, at the window, looking in
 To beam farewell on one who's loved you long
 And very truly

The Poet of Levy's poem would be the right blot, whose delicacy in seeking to read the unadulterated essence of Life must spell his doom. But of course, such a facile reading of Romanticism authorizes neither a vital textuality nor an invigorated sense of being. This is the unforgiving reality that Shelley knew all too well and that his Victorian readers often could not—as Thomson could not—read in his work. Levy seems to be playing intently against Thomson's sentimentalization of his Romantic precursor, especially in her resistance to giving the Poet a name. For in Shelley's *Alastor*, the quester is a Poet too who goes without name, and he famously rejects the love of an Arab maiden in favor of a transcendent vision which he pursues fruitlessly unto death. The *Alastor* poet stands as a critique of solipsism, and of the deeply vexed relationship between transcendent longing and social existence. The minor Poet's death is, for Levy, one that refuses to signify, that does not allegorize into a meaning beyond itself, and in this respect it stands as elegy against the elegiac.¹⁹ If in life he had constituted himself in the terms of an elusive textuality, in death he inverts the process: it is as if by killing himself he is trying to convert the fragmented narrative of his life into a lyric effusion, to make of it a firework rather than a slow flicker that just burns out. From minor poet he becomes major catastrophe, a distinction that at least grants him, well, life, a life in the text.

It is in this respect that the poem becomes not only elegy, but failed elegy, or at least elegy that challenges, among others, the conventions of consolation. When the Poet's friend, Tom Leigh, enters the room in the poem's epilogue, he notes the fragments of the Poet's aesthetic failures:

the old instrument
(A violin, no Stradivarius)
He played so ill on; in the table drawer
Large schemes of undone work. Poems half-writ;
Wild drafts of symphonies; big plans of fugues;
Some scraps of writing in a woman's hand:
No more—the scattered pages of a tale,
A sorry tale that no man cared to read.

(180–87)

The Poet's may be a sorry tale that Levy cared to transform, but it resists being "read," allegorized, transformed into moral. The final lines go to Tom, who asserts the futility and the naiveté of his dead friend's act:

I, Tom Leigh, his friend
I have no word at all to say of this.
Nay, I had deem'd him more philosopher;
For did he think by this one paltry deed

To cut the knot of circumstance, and snap
The chain which binds all being?

(202–07)

Tom has “no word at all to say of this” because the scene of necessity implodes into itself. The suicide is a suicide, not a testament to the delicacy of the yearning soul. Indeed, though a poem like Arnold’s “Thyrsis” endures the challenge of its author’s difficulty in offering praise to its subject, in resurrecting and hence addressing him, it does still manage the convention of praising the dead, in however qualified a form. Levy hails the process by which elegy affirms the living memory of the deceased even as she engages some of its self-subverting tendencies: the Poet is remembered in this poem only as forgotten. He is a presence only in abstraction, whose name, for the purposes of Levy’s poem, is effaced. He cannot address a living presence, and so qualifies the convention of dramatic monologue. He cannot be addressed by the author as a living presence, and so qualifies the convention of elegy.

Xantippe experiences a form of alienation that would have been more readily identifiable to Levy’s readers, since she inhabits a world that gives intellectual women very little ground on which to stand. Interestingly, though *Xantippe* was written some three years before the composition of *A Minor Poet*, it too is subtly haunted by the shadow of James Thomson. In a little known essay of 1866, “A Word for Xantippe,” Thomson challenges the popular characterizations of Xantippe that have come down to us, pointing out that were Socrates alive today, he would be prosecuted in the courts for wife neglect. He concludes the essay by calling for a corrective: “We have perhaps one living writer with genius and learning and wisdom and fairness enough to picture fairly the conjugal life of Saint Socrates and shrew Xantippe: need I say that this writer is George Eliot? One would give something for the picture.”²⁰ George Eliot wrote no such defense, but clearly Levy decided to take on the challenge instead.

But by far the most intriguing feature of Thomson’s highly charged essay is his linking of Socrates’ emotional and financial neglect of his wife with the attitude of Christianity in its treatment of domestic affairs. His argument is somewhat skewed, to be sure, but if Levy is taking up Thomson’s challenge to offer a word for Xantippe, then the anti-Christian polemic is an important point of reference. I cite parts of two successive paragraphs.

Should the reader, however, assert that in this respect, as in so many others, Socrates approached closely to the ideal character of a Christian man, I think it would be rash to dispute the assertion. For one cannot but remember the texts:—“Then one said unto him, Behold thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with

thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!" And again, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." And again, "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting."

Those heathen Greeks put Socrates to death soon after he was seventy: those unbelieving Jews, sharper than the Greeks, got Jesus crucified when he was only thirty-three; we Christian English are too enlightened and tolerant to make such men glorious martyrs; a parish prosecution and a doctor's certificate would extinguish them much more effectually; and no heroic fortitude, no sublime enthusiasm, could elevate the victims and cover the prosecutors with infamy.²¹

These are bold words for 1866, and Levy appropriates their import to intimate a chilling meta-reference: If Socrates' rejection of Xantippe is the type, as Thomson has it, of a specifically Christian domestic morality, and if, as we have already seen, the dramatic monologue ironically showcases the speaker's essential alienation, then the feminist railing against women's exclusion also provides a nuanced reference to Jewish self-identity in a predominantly Christian society.

This dynamic is strikingly, if unobtrusively, highlighted when she describes the Symposium scene—Plato descanting, "Alkibiades the beautiful" worshipping, and Aspasia, Perikles' partner, being offered the appreciative regard by Socrates denied to Xantippe:

"This fair Aspasia, which our Perikles
Hath brought from realms afar, and set on high
In our Athenian city, hath a mind,
I doubt not, of a strength beyond her race;
And makes employ of it, beyond the way
Of women nobly fitted: woman's frail—
Her body rarely stands the test of soul;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet,
Feasting at life's great banquet with wide throat."

(163–72)

The woman whose “mind” is finally credited is designated as possessing a strength specifically “beyond her race,” not only “beyond the way of women nobly fitted.” And when Xantippe responds in fury, she appropriates a rhetoric that would have been recognizable as belonging to the discourse of the “nervous Jew”:

“By all great powers around us! can it be
That we poor women are empirical?
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate,
With sense that thrilled response to ev’ry touch
Of nature’s, and their task in not complete?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth?

(177–84)

Reuben Sachs opens with its protagonist returning from a vacation occasioned by his nervous collapse, a condition that his doctor explains is rampant among Jews: “ ‘More than half my nervous patients are recruited from the ranks of the Jews,’ said the great physician whom Reuben consulted. ‘You pay the penalty of too high a civilization’ ” (198). In her essay “Jewish Children,” Levy complains:

It must not be forgotten that those very things which go to make up the peculiar and irresistible charm of young Israel constitute at the same time his danger. Such vivacity, such sense of fun, such sensibility and intelligence at so early an age, could only be the product of a very delicate and elaborate organism; a bit of mechanism that will not bear to be tampered with rashly. We scarcely needed Mr. Sully and his psychology to tell us that mental precocity is by no means necessarily the forerunner of mental mediocrity, but it may nearly always be accepted as the sign of a highly developed nervous organisation. And the Jewish child, descended of many city-bred ancestors as he is, is apt to be a very complicated little bundle of nerves indeed, to whom woe betide should he meet with unduly rough handling. (530)

Levy is appropriating an ancient stereotype about Jewish mental health, one that had gained a “scientific” justification by the late nineteenth century. As Sander Gilman has documented, the idea of the Jew as particularly prone to hysteria and neurasthenia was much in discussion by the late nineteenth century, and indeed it reached what Gilman calls “canonical form” in Charcot’s pronouncement “that nervous illnesses of all types are innumerable more frequent among Jews than among other groups.”²² Levy grafts the image of the

Jew onto one image of female intelligence. For Xantippe could in fact be railing against Levy's own characterization of the hypersensitive Jew, and in this we remember again Thomson's equation of Socrates with Jesus in the management of the affections. The conditions of Xantippe's alienation are powerfully resonant of the subtle alienation experienced by Amy Levy, a disquiet that echoes in virtually her entire oeuvre.

These are poems of self-cancelling, then, and their formal self-subversions mirror their subjects' readiness for real, physical annihilation, which mirrors, finally, their author's readiness for death. Amy Levy died by her own hand, and her death necessarily inscribes itself into the lens of our reading, even as she challenges our modes of cultural refraction.

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Notes

1. Cynthia Scheinberg has written two essays about Amy Levy that seek to contextualize her specifically as a Jewish woman questioning the dominant premises of her cultural ethos. See "Canonizing the Jew: Amy Levy's Challenge to Victorian Poetic Identity," *Victorian Studies* 39 (1996): 173–200 and "Recasting 'sympathy and judgment': Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 173–92. The latter essay in particular bears on issues relevant to my own interests; however, concerned as it necessarily is to draw out an idea about cultural displacement, it is able to offer only scant attention to the poetry itself. In *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), Deborah Epstein Nord places Amy Levy within the social contexts of Victorian urban community, where women such as Levy were afforded finally an opportunity to establish affiliations that validated their independence. Emma Francis reads Levy as Jew and likely lesbian in "Amy Levy: Contradictions?—Feminism and Semitic Discourse," in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), 183–204. In her suggestive chapter, "'A Music of Thine Own': Women's Poetry—an Expressive Tradition?" Isobel Armstrong includes Amy Levy in a broadly ranging discussion of women's protest writing, "in which an overt sexual politics addresses the institutions and customs which burden women," in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 319.
2. The varied efforts at contextualizing Levy have been very important and surely need to be further augmented, as I hope I have managed to some degree; however, very little actual reading of the poetry has taken place, and until that starts to happen there is some danger that Levy will be confined to an occasion for the discussion of the politics of exclusion. Her poetic manipulations are deeply nuanced and not easily categorized.
3. All references to Levy's poems are from *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993) and are cited by line number.
4. The relationship between speaker and reader (and reader and auditor) in dramatic monologue has given rise to fascinating debates about the dynamics of implicit

communication. Robert Langbaum famously sees the dramatic speaker as engaging the sympathy of the reader and hence drawing him or her into his "power." See *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957). Langbaum's influential view has been much challenged by such critics as John Maynard in "Reading the Reader in Robert Browning's Monologues" (in *Critical Essays on Robert Browning*, ed. Mary Ellen Gibson [New York: G. K. Hall, 1992]), who observes that a reader's subjective orientation is an important determinant in the production of meaning. Likewise, Dorothy Mermin in *The Audience in the Poem* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983) observes that the poets themselves often regard their presumed readers with ambivalence, a view with which I am most sympathetic. In *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), David Shaw asserts that the monologue's silent auditors in fact often challenge the poem's "typical subversion of cultural authority" (4). He offers this view as part of a general thesis about the "growing belief in the validity of antithetical beliefs" that accounts for "the rise of the dramatic monologue in the Victorian and modern periods" (195). The common thread of all such accounts, however, is that dramatic monologue is never simply an interiorized, expressive lyric.

5. Here we might be reminded of the tensions inherent in writing as a woman about a historical female's misconstruals: in the oft-cited "The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet" (in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. Angela Leighton [Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996]), Dorothy Mermin surveys the dilemma of Victorian women poets (primarily Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti) who must function at once as helpless damsel and heroic knight. The self-contradiction is resonant of Levy's portrayal of Xantippe's angry—but highly qualified—identification with the women who pursue work she herself regards as demeaning. As Mermin suggests, "The Victorian woman poet has to be two things at once, or in two places, whenever she tries to locate herself within the poetic world" (200). Since indeed Xantippe cannot occupy two mutually exclusive roles, her effort in this poem to locate herself is articulated as a death speech.
6. See Alan Sinfield, *Alfred Tennyson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 53.
7. James Thomson, "Sympathy," in *Essays and Phantasies* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881), 230.
8. Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," in *Works*, 18 vols., (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904), 5: 471.
9. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, in *Works*, 2: 9.
10. See J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 166.
11. See especially David Shaw's magisterial *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) for a clear account of the changing fortunes of elegy over the centuries.
12. Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.
13. Levy's qualifications to the genre of elegy provide, I believe, an appropriate forum in which to register my disagreement with Celeste Schenck's argument about women's elegies, which she sees in terms of feminine connectedness: "women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead, whereas male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own" (15). See "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy,"

Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 5 (1986): 13–24. Levy's struggles with poetic identity are never, in fact, resolved as neatly as Schenck's examples tend to be. What Levy registers everywhere is a pervasive sense of disconnection insistently aware of itself.

14. See also Scheinberg's "Recasting 'sympathy and judgment,'" where she argues that Levy's dramatic monologues "show how Levy works to destabilize any notion of universal poetic utterance; in both content and structure, her dramatic monologues display auditors who can not quite ever identify with speakers who voice difference" (184). My readings of the poems themselves differ markedly from Scheinberg's analyses, but I am indebted to her discussion of Levy's relationship to the structures of Victorian linguistic power.
15. I am thinking, of course, of Book Twelve of *The Prelude* (1850), in which Wordsworth, hoping still to give "Substance and life to what I feel" acknowledges, "I see by glimpses now" (*The Prelude*: 1799, 1805, 1850, eds. M. H. Abrams et al. [New York: Norton, 1979], 12.284, 12.281). Wordsworth's effort to effect a narrative continuity within the constraints of a distinctly lyrical epic stands as one antecedent of the Poet's self-conception.
16. Robert Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto," in *Robert Browning: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), lines 84–87.
17. James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, in *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, ed. Anne Ridler (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 182.
18. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 312.
19. In *Elegy and Paradox* David Shaw, though recognizing various divergences from the convention, remarks of elegy that "to commemorate the dead is to affirm that their lives do not fall totally into nothingness. Gathering up, pondering, and justifying the meaning of these lives, elegies bring into play values that did not exist before" (8). *A Minor Poet* acknowledges this convention precisely by indirection.
20. Thomson, "A Word for Xantippe," in *Essays and Phantasies*, 227.
21. *Ibid.*, 226–27.
22. Quoted in Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 288.