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## ‘All the world is blind’: unveiling same-sex desire in the poetry of Amy Levy

*Carolyn Lake*

Amy Levy was a late-nineteenth-century British writer whose short life produced three novels, three collections of poetry, and numerous short stories and essays. She was active in the 1880s intellectual culture of Bloomsbury and acquainted with such figures as Olive Schreiner, Vernon Lee, the Black sisters, Eleanor Marx and Grant Allen. Levy’s scholarly and creative writings reflect a keen awareness of contemporary literary and cultural movements, often prefiguring discussions regarding feminism and modernism which would not take place until after her death in 1889. In 1883, Levy published an essay in *The Cambridge Review* on the writings of James ‘B.V.’ Thomson, author of epic poem ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ (1874-1880).<sup>1</sup> Levy observed of Thomson that

[h]e is distinctly what in our loose phraseology we call a minor poet; no prophet, standing above and outside things, to whom all sides of a truth (more or less foreshortened, certainly) are visible; but a passionately subjective being, with intense eyes fixed on one side of the solid polygon

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1 ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ was first published serially in Charles Bradlaugh’s atheist *National Reformer* in 1874 and, later, in the 1880 book, *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems*.

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of truth, and realizing that one side with a fervour and intensity to which the philosopher with his birdseye view rarely attains. (501)<sup>2</sup>

The narrative perspective that Levy alludes to here, a literary mode that eschews omniscience and distanced objectivity in favour of a ‘passionate’ partiality, is a technique she would later adopt in her third and final collection of poetry published in 1889 shortly after her death, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. Levy, however, would more explicitly reference Thomson in her second collection of poetry, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, from 1884, of which the title poem, a dramatic monologue following the final contemplations of a male poet, is an homage to Thomson. Yet her literary appraisal of Thomson is also an indication of Levy’s wide literary and cultural knowledge. Compare Levy’s assertion on Thomson above to the second paragraph of Charles Baudelaire’s ‘The Painter of Modern Life’:

Happily from time to time knights errant step into the lists — critics, art collectors, lovers of the arts, curious-minded idlers — who assert that neither Raphael nor Racine has every secret, that minor poets have something to be said for them, substantial and delightful things to their credit, and finally that, however much we may like general beauty, which is expressed by the classical poets and artists, we nonetheless make a mistake to neglect particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance, the description of manners. (1)

Levy’s reading of Thomson as a ‘passionately subjective’ minor poet echoes Baudelaire’s call to recognise the minor poet whose work expresses ‘particular beauty’. It is impossible to know whether the allusion to Baudelaire here is intentional or incidental, yet Levy was fluent enough in French to perform paid translations (Beckman, ‘Urban’ 208) and references to Baudelaire and the French symbolists abound in her work, not least through her intense literary preoccupation with the city. This scholastic interest in the particular rather than the universal, and the recognition of minor or marginal feelings and behaviours, is performed in Levy’s Sapphic poetry, functioning as politically queer.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Levy’s Thomson essay and poetry are taken from Melvyn New’s *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy 1861-1889*.

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Although Levy's work fell into obscurity shortly after her death<sup>3</sup>, it was brought back to critical attention in the 1980s by scholars profiling her as a Jewish woman writer. Prominent and first among these works was Edward Wagenknecht's 1983 collection, *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women*. She was then resituated in 1990 as a New Woman novelist with Deborah Epstein Nord's article in *Signs*, "'Neither pairs nor odd': Female community in late nineteenth-century London'. It is in these early analyses of Levy as a minority figure (as woman or Jew) where much scholarship has stayed. In her review of criticism about Levy, Sarah Minsloff observes that 'Minority identity was the reason for Levy's exile into literary obscurity; it was the means by which she was recovered to critical attention, and it has remained the crux of critical work on Levy's writing' (1318).

This interest in Levy's minor status is unsurprising, as what we know of her life indicates that she herself was interested in theorising, perhaps embracing, the minor as an epistemological frame. However, the overwhelming focus on Levy to date as a minority figure has tended to eschew the extent to which Levy actively worked against stable notions of identity. She did not embrace what we would now call 'identity politics' and worked against the universalising tendencies of canonical Victorian poetry. Rather, Levy uses the minor as a literary technique to represent, or acknowledge the impossibility of representation for, ontologies and epistemologies which have historically been denied and erased. The early focus on Levy as representing minority identity as woman or Jew has foreclosed queer readings of her work which do not, and cannot, align with identity paradigms. Her essay on Thomson, as I shall discuss, most explicitly articulates her opinions and arguments on the role and condition of the minor, but it is through her poetry, particularly her lyric poetry, that the minor is most effectively performed.

Amy Levy was born in 1861, the second of seven children to Isabelle and Lewis Levy (Bernstein 13). The middle-class Levy family resided at Clapham Road in what is now South Lambeth (Pullen 14). While it is difficult to clearly ascertain the Levy family's commitment to, or opinion of, Judaism, it is clear from Levy's life that her family had progressive views in relation to women's

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3 Melvyn New's 1993 publication of *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy* brought a significant portion of Levy's work back into print and circulation for the first time in nearly a century.

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education, and were not afraid to expose their children to non-Jewish religion, culture and sociality. As a young teenager in 1875, Levy won the 'junior prize' in *Kind Words Magazine for Boys and Girls* for her essay on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (Bernstein 43). That same year Levy published her first poem, 'The Ballade of Ida Grey' in the feminist magazine *The Pelican* (Bernstein 43). Levy's feminist consciousness would be further developed when, in 1876, she was sent to the progressively-run (and secular) Brighton High School for Girls, founded by Emily and Maria Shirreff five years earlier and managed during Levy's time by Miss Edith Creak (Bernstein 14). The Brighton school was part of the Girl's Public Day School Company belonging to the Shirreffs, which was formed in 1871 to provide high-standard and rigorous secondary education for female students. In addition to a more conventional curriculum of geography, history, higher mathematics, French and German, Brighton offered female students studies in Latin — a significant requisite for classical studies and a subject traditionally denied to female students (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 30). It was during this time at Brighton that Levy wrote what is now likely her most highly regarded poem, 'Xantippe', the dramatic monologue from the perspective of Socrates's wife (Bernstein 14).

Letters from Levy to her sister Katie during her years at Brighton show Levy with developed, romantic attachments to other women. Levy does not mark these desires as particularly extraordinary or deviant; indeed there is reference to Katie (who was by all evidence heterosexual) having had at least one such same-sex crush herself in years past (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 221). Nevertheless, Levy does describe an attempt to visit her Brighton crush, Edith Creak, as 'bold' (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 220) and Levy remarks many times on the difference between her feelings of same-sex desire and Katie's. One letter opens with Levy writing 'I utterly despise you! I never did think your passion" [*sic*] (?) worth much and now my suspicions of its spuriousness are confirmed' (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 221). Without the corresponding letter from Katie to which this is a reply, it is impossible to determine the context of Levy's outpouring, yet it is clear that she feels a sense of betrayal in Katie's dwindled same-sex interest. In a later letter, Levy appears to tease Katie about her opposite-sex desires, when she writes of a man who is an 'awful fool & ignoramus' and tells Katie that because 'he was a real man so *you* wd. have honored him' (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 224,

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emphasis in original). Perhaps the most significant letter, however, is the one in which Levy tells Katie that she envisions they will now have very different futures to one another. This admission comes after reflecting on time spent with Miss Creak ('that blessed woman'):

Today that blessed woman mounted guard for 4 hours — so you may imagine my eyes were not bent solely on my paper — She did look sweet — just working mathematics contentedly to Herself. She has flung out minute crumbs of sweetness lately to her wormy adorer, who bagged a divine passion-inspiring — whenever I think-of-it — embrace today at the sanctum door. Frankly I'm more in love with her than ever — isn't it grim? I don't believe it will go for ages; and I can never care for anyone or anything else while it lasts. Don't you like these egotistic outpourings? Of course this is quite confident-like. I make such different future pictures to what I used to-you married maternal, prudent & [illegible] with a tendency to laugh at the plain High School Mistress sister who grinds, lodges with chums and adores 'without return'. (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 224)

Here Levy positions her future outside of the ideological domain of the patriarchal family by contrasting it with Katie's hypothetical 'married maternal' one. That this prediction comes after an extended recount of her feelings for Miss Creak indicates that Levy's potential future as a single, working-woman is motivated not merely or even primarily by a desire for independence, education and professional growth. Rather, Levy here is positioning the family as synonymous with heterosexuality. It is also notable how Levy recognises that her romantic desires contrast with opposite-sex desires, and identifies from them that a 'new' future, with new prospects must therefore follow.<sup>4</sup> Though Levy at no point in any of her other remaining letters *explicitly* constructs herself with an alternate 'lesbian' sexual identity, in the 'pre-lesbian' era in which she lived and wrote, this account can be read as an attempt to construct a realisable alternative to heterosexuality out of the discourses available to her in London in the late nineteenth century.

In October 1879 Levy enrolled at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she was the first Jewish student to attend (Bernstein 43, 15). Women had been allowed to enrol in Cambridge for only ten years at this time, with the first

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4 Emma Francis also makes this observation (196).

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women's college, Girton College, having opened in 1869 and Newnham itself in 1871. Levy never completed her studies at Cambridge, leaving after two years, though her literary output during this time was great — publishing two short stories in 1880 ('Euphemia: A Sketch' in *Victoria Magazine* and 'Mrs. Pierrepont: A Sketch in Two Parts' in *Temple Bar*) and having her first collection of poetry, *Xantippe and Other Verse*, published in 1881 during her final year. Letters from this period continue to recount romantic interests in other women; being helped by one such woman in gym class is described as 'bliss' (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 229).

After leaving Cambridge, Levy travelled throughout the Continent. In 1886 she met Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) in Florence (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 254-5). She appears to have developed some romantic feelings for Lee though they were never reciprocated (Goody, 'Murder' 464; Beckman, 'Amy Levy'; Newman 53). Letters certainly show strong feelings for Lee, with Levy writing in one, for example, that 'You are something of an electric battery to me (this doesn't sound polite) & I am getting faint fr. want of contact!' (261). Becoming acquainted with Lee brought Levy into contact with new social circles, which included fellow artists and probable homosexuals (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 132). One such new acquaintance, Dorothy Bloomfield, was likely romantically engaged to Levy for a time (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 152). Levy clearly relished her relationship with Lee and her time spent in Florence, as references to both are peppered throughout her late poetry.

Despite the queer desires clearly expressed in Levy's letters and, as I shall argue, her poetry, the only full-length queer reading of Levy to date is Emma Francis's astute 'Amy Levy: Contradictions? Feminism and Semitic Discourse', which, to necessarily over-simplify, analyses the (dis)junctions between Levy's radical sexual politics and her comparatively conservative racial politics. Francis reads a collection of Levy's 'queer' poems from *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* through the ghosting theory Terry Castle formulates in *The Apparitional Lesbian*. Yet, even here, Francis is forced to conclude:

I hesitate to call the poems in the 'Love, Dreams and Death' sequence 'lesbian' because they work to interrogate rather than affirm sexuality and sexual identity ... [H]er later poetry interrogates the process by



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which mythic, symbolic and identificatory structures are produced. Levy's later poetry studies subjectivities and forms of experience which become increasingly less locatable, less intelligible within conventional accounts of sexual and social identification. Her explorations of same-sex desire invoke some disquieting images and associations which concentrate more on pain than on pleasure, more on conflict than on consensus. (196)

Francis goes on to write that her reservations in deeming this collection of poems 'lesbian' stems from their anarchic relationship to sexuality (201). I disagree with Francis's conclusion that Levy's poems are not lesbian *because* they interrogate sexuality and sexual identity. Sexual identity, as distinct from sex acts or desires, is a relatively new phenomenon and not one applicable to many same-sex attracted women prior to the twentieth century. A paradigm not centred on identity is required for lesbian historiography. Monique Wittig's observation that to be a lesbian inherently produces an opposition to not only the category of 'woman' but to the ideological institutions that define and produce 'woman' (13) renders lesbian ontology — especially in the nineteenth century — less locatable, less intelligible, more conflicted and, indeed, sometimes painful. 'Conventional' accounts of sexual and social identification were, indeed largely still are, heterosexual. A woman's role was defined in relation to the home and the family. The process of subjectification for women in the nineteenth century was, therefore, predicated on heterosexuality. Without a widespread discourse of lesbianism that creates opportunities for lesbian subject-hood, a dismantling of 'conventional' (heterosexual) sexual and social identification is one path towards realising a queer existence. Levy's poetry is strategically queer in this regard. It is actively navigating how to represent an existence that is almost entirely denied by cultural, legal and linguistic institutions, resulting in a near symbolic annihilation. Levy's poetics and her politics of the minor engage lyrical modes that give voice to a pre-lesbian subject.

Two poems in particular from *A London Plane-Tree* represent the symbolic exclusion of lesbian desire. The first is 'A Wall Flower', the title of which already positions the speaker as 'outside' the represented cultural milieu. This exclusion is heightened by the poem's epigraph:

I lounge in the doorway and languish in vain  
While Tom, Dick and Harry are dancing with Jane.



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Read queerly, the speaker is looking at a love-interest as she dances. The issue is not that the speaker's love-interest ('Jane') is dancing with a specific lover but that the speaker's love-interest is dancing with 'man' as a category. The use of 'Tom, Dick and Harry' colloquially refers to men, all men. It implies, when read queerly, that the speaker is watching Jane enmeshed in the sociality of heterosexuality. The four stanzas of the poem proper then read:

My spirit rises to the music's beat;  
There is a leaden fiend lurks in my feet!  
To move unto your motion, Love, were sweet.  
Somewhere, I think, some other where, not here,  
In other ages, on another sphere,  
I danced with you, and you with me, my dear.  
In perfect motion did our bodies sway,  
To perfect music that was heard always;  
Woe's me, that am so dull of foot to-day!  
To move unto your motion, Love, were sweet;  
My spirit rises to the music's beat —  
But, ah, the leaden demon in my feet! (399)

Dancing, a cultural activity of heterosexual courtship, is used here as a stand-in for what the speaker is unable to intelligibly do — love a woman. In a letter written by Levy to Dollie Maitland Radford in 1884, she describes a piece of prose she is working on and what narrative tropes she is employing. Taking jest, Levy sarcastically refers to the machinations of her heterosexual romance plot as 'subtle' (Beckman, 'Amy Levy' 244). Beckman notes that this demonstrates Levy's self-awareness of the 'formulaic nature of popular fiction' (244), but it also demonstrates an awareness of the performativity of heterosexual courtship. The cynicism present in this letter is presented in 'A Wall Flower' without the humour, as the consequences for the speaker of heterosexual scripts are obliquely manifest, excluding her from participation. The second stanza points to a utopia — 'some other where, not here. / In other ages, on another sphere' — where such desires can be realised, where both their bodies would move together and where the music would play with perfection. While, as Francis notes, there is a tragedy to Levy's 'queer' poems, some, like 'A Wall Flower', also envision, even if momentarily, utopic otherworlds where same-sex desire could exist and signify.

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Writing of prose (rather than poetry), Castle has noted of lesbian fiction that it often exhibits an otherworldliness. She writes:

By its very nature lesbian fiction has — and can only have — a profoundly attenuated relationship with what we think of, stereotypically, as narrative verisimilitude, plausibility, or ‘truth to life’. Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural sense, implausible — the subversion of male homosocial desire — lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as ‘realistic’ in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical, or utopian tendency. (88)

‘A Wall Flower’ exhibits these queer tendencies when its desires are fulfilled only in the speculative otherworld. The ‘leaden fiend/demon’ (also an otherworldly reference) is that which figuratively renders the speaker immobile, holding her down and foreclosing her realisation of same-sex desire. Read as an exploration of queer symbolics, the leaden fiend/demon is the cultural impossibility of representing lesbian desire in the late nineteenth century.

Levy’s posthumously published poem ‘A Ballad of Religion and Marriage’ also creates a utopic otherworld. It foresees a time when women’s lives and identities will not be determined by their marriage-status. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Grant, in a million years at most,  
Folks shall be neither pairs nor odd —  
Alas! we sha’n’t be there to boast  
“Marriage has gone the way of God!” (404)

While ‘odd’ is often conceptualised in relation to the ‘problem’ of ‘surplus women’ identified in the 1851 census which led to the title of George Gissing’s 1893 novel *The Odd Women*, Castle also notes that ‘odd’ had been used by same-sex attracted women to describe themselves and their alternate sexualities as early as Anne Lister in the 1820s (10). The critique of marriage here, while most obviously occurring from a critique of gendered relations, also implicitly critiques a powerful structure and symbol of heterosexuality.

Another tactic Levy employs is to do away with gender altogether, as in the poem ‘Philosophy’ in which the speaker recalls a summer spent with a ‘dear friend’, when they would stay up ‘talking half the night’ on the ‘stairway’s topmost height’ gazing ‘on the crowd below’, the ‘philistine and flippant throng’

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(401). Here, in youth, they were ‘Scarce friends, not lovers (each avers), / But sexless, safe Philosophers’ (401). Sharing here a relationship that is ‘above’ gender, the speaker also notes that not only does gender dissolve between the pair but their individuated subjectivities do as well: ‘For, you and I, we did eschew / The egoistic “I” and “you”’ (401). Joseph Bristow notes that the sex of both speaker and friend is ‘teasingly obscure’ and he proposes a resistant reading to the poem’s ‘structures of denial’, suggesting that ‘Their scornful pride — setting themselves above the Philistines — may well have masked their amorous interest in each other’ (85).

The quest in ‘Philosophy’ for a sexless society performs the same symbolic refusal of patriarchy that the existence of the lesbian does (Castle 5). ‘A Wall Flower’, however, concedes its social reality by positioning its speaker as barred from the social situation in which she finds herself, removed from the activities and desires displayed before her. She has set herself apart and is unable or unwilling to engage in the heterosexual cultural practices before her, but with no other social reality available, she is left to languish in a doorway, itself a liminal ‘between-space’.

The second poem that explores the symbolic impossibility of lesbian desire is ‘At a Dinner Party’. Its two stanzas read:

With fruit and flowers the board is deckt,  
The wine and laughter flow;  
I’ll not complain — could one expect  
So dull a world to know?  
You look across the fruit and flowers,  
My glance your glances find. —  
It is our secret, only ours,  
Since all the world is blind. (400)

Here the scene describes same-sex love not expected or acknowledged by the wider world. Indeed, the world is ‘blind’ to their love which is ‘secret’. While like Levy’s other Sapphic poems, ‘At a Dinner Party’ conspicuously eludes gendering the speaker (and additionally here, naming the gender of the love interest), a queer reading of this poem is supported by the doubled reference to fruit and flowers over which the loving glances are exchanged, both objects being commonly gendered as feminine. The invocation of the ‘secret’, particularly the love which

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is secret, is also coded as queer. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted the importance of secrecy and disclosure, of demarcations between the public and the private, to understandings of modern sexualities (71-2). 'At a Dinner Party' performs these pleasures and perils of the queer closet. Though the lovers are separated their shared glances are erotically charged. This ambivalence is a common feature of popular understandings of queer subjectivity. That the speaker pities the world too dull to recognise queer love shows how queer 'identity' is often 'experienced as a stigmatizing mark as well as a form of romantic exceptionalism' (Love 3).

A poem from Levy's earlier collection of poetry, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, also includes references to love which is secret and which eludes literal physical intimacy. This is 'Sinfonia Eroica', dedicated in brackets to Sylvia. The title references Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No.3 of the same name, which is renowned for the funeral march of the second movement. Levy was obviously aware of the cultural valency of this funeral march, referring in the poem to a 'mystic melody of death' (377). The poem opens 'My lover, my lover' as the speaker recalls an evening in June when both persons happened to frequent the same music hall, where a 'high magician' can 'draw the dreams from out the secret breast' (377). Soon after arriving the speaker sees her love interest:

I, with the rest,  
Sat there athirst, atremble for the sound;  
And as my aimless glances wandered round,  
Far off, across the hush'd, expectant throng,  
I saw your face that fac'd mine. (377)

As in 'At a Dinner Party', the soon-to-be object of the speaker's love is encountered from a distance — space and people are between them, and they are unable to be or converse together openly. The poem continues:

Clear and strong  
Rush'd forth the sound, a mighty mountain stream;  
Across the clust'ring heads mine eyes did seem  
By subtle forces drawn, your eyes to meet.  
Mingled in all my blood and made it wine.  
Straight I forgot the world's great woe and mine;  
My spirit's murky lead grew molten fire;  
Despair itself was rapture.

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Ever higher,  
Stronger and clearer rose the mighty strain;  
Then sudden fell; then all was still again,  
And I sank back, quivering as one in pain. (377)

Here, unlike the two poems examined earlier, there is a form of consummation. As in the connected poem that follows in *A Minor Poet*, 'To Sylvia', this poem conflates bodily experiences with music. As the speaker's spirit grows hot as 'molten fire', her despair becomes rapturous and 'the strain' becomes stronger and clearer, before ending suddenly leaving her 'quivering as one in pain'. The 'problem' of pre-1900 lesbian representation is also partially eclipsed here through associating it with, and exploring it through, music — a form of expression that avoids the representational constraints of linguistic signification. It is difficult to read these lines without a sexual, orgasmic subtext. Yet, again, not only is the object and source of the desire out of reach, but the desire itself is associated with a larger despair than *le petite mort* suggests. Here are the beginnings of what would come to dominate Levy's Sapphic poems in *A London Plane-Tree*: her preoccupation with death. While the music allows Levy opportunity to explore sexual desire in 'Sinfonia Eroica', her particular choice of symphony also associates the desire with not only heroism but also with despair and death.

If we turn back to the Sapphic poems from *A London Plane-Tree*, it is evident that many of the poems concern themselves with death, loss and pain, as Francis notes. As previously mentioned, Castle has noted the long history of literary 'lesbian ghosts' but it is also evident that Levy explores states of liminality other than those between life and death, finding in these inarticulate times and spaces opportunities for transgressive feelings and behaviours.

Interested in this liminality in Levy's late poetry, Alex Goody argues that while Levy seeks ontology outside or between identity categories, such a project is inevitably fraught:

Poems such as 'In the Mile End Road' reveal the double-edged nature of Levy's writing/passing, of her celebration of the space between. The articulation of transgressive racial and sexual identities — of being neither one nor an other — leads to a splitting of subjectivity into disparate fragments. The text is enunciated in the action of traversing and thereby delineating the liminal space between the posed fragments of identity, but

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the becoming-subject cannot keep circulating, keep passing between; at some point, the self is sacrificed, destroyed as the Other. The idealized 'smooth' space that Deleuze and Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus* and elsewhere, which does not have separation, capture, territorialisation, or designation, is perhaps what Levy's *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* is seeking, but what the poems show is that this ideal is a figuration that cannot be maintained. ('Passing' 175)

The unintelligibility and non-recognition of female same-sex desire, the unwillingness to 'separate', 'capture', 'territorialise' or 'designate', though, can also be read as a queer strategy of representation. There is, as Goody notes, a refusal to submit to the (heterosexual) subjectifying structures of late-nineteenth-century London, but there is also a frustration, such as in 'Philosophy' and 'A Dinner Party', that late-nineteenth-century London fails to recognise the lesbian as a subject. Where Goody reads the themes of death and loss in Levy's 'Sapphic' poems as a psychoanalytically narcissistic dissolution of the self, in a beloved-as-self model, they can also be read as politically queer, as acknowledging that which socially, culturally, legally and politically could not be acknowledged, represented or brought into discursive being. Castle has noted that due to its challenge to patriarchal paradigms, 'it is perhaps not surprising that at least until around 1900 lesbianism manifests itself in the Western literary imagination primarily as an absence, as chimera or *amor impossibilia* — a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist' (30-1). While Goody concedes this representational impossibility and acknowledges the liberatory potential of a Deleuzian refusal of identity politics, by reading through a psychoanalytical model of narcissism he does not capture the creative potential of the simultaneously impossible yet omnipresent 'lesbian ghost'. That is, to be haunted by loss is to be constantly surrounded by that which is lost. To quote Castle at some length:

A ghost, according to *Webster's Ninth*, is a spirit believed to appear in a 'bodily likeness.' To haunt, we find, is 'to visit often,' or 'to recur constantly and spontaneously,' 'to stay around or persist,' or 'to reappear continually.' The ghost, in other words, is a paradox. Though nonexistent, it nonetheless *appears*. Indeed, so vividly does it appear — if only in the 'mind's eye' — one feels unable to get away from it. ... What of the spectral metaphor and the lesbian writer? For her, one suspects, 'seeing ghosts' may be a matter — not so much of derealisation — but of rhapsodical

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embodiment: a ritual calling up, or *apophrades*, in the old mythical sense. The dead are indeed brought back to life; the absent loved one returns. For the spectral vernacular, it turns out, continues its own powerful and perverse magic. Used imaginatively — repossessed, so to speak — the very trope that evaporates can also solidify. In the strangest turn of all, perhaps, the lesbian body itself returns: and the feeble, elegiac waving off — the gesture of would-be exorcism — becomes instead a new and passionate beckoning. (46-7)

In much of Levy's Sapphic poetry there is a literal or metaphorical absence attached to the love-interest, whether it be in the form of a dead love, a lost love or a love that literally cannot be reached. Yet there is also a deep carnality to Levy's Sapphic poetry. Take, for instance, 'Borderland', where, as the speaker lies in bed unsure whether she is waking or sleeping, she is 'aware / Of an unseen presence hovering' that 'is she', 'sweet as love, as soft as death':

Am I waking, am I sleeping?  
As the first faint dawn comes creeping  
Thro' the pane, I am aware  
Of an unseen presence hovering,  
Round, above, in the dusky air:  
A downy bird, with an odorous wing,  
That fans my forehead, and sheds perfume,  
As sweet as love, as soft as death,  
Drowsy-slow through the summer-gloom.  
My heart in some dream-rapture saith,  
*It is she.* Half in a swoon,  
I spread my arms in slow delight. —  
O prolong, prolong the night,  
For the nights are short in June! (391)

'Borderland' takes place in the early hours of the morning between night and day, when only faint light pierces the darkness, making shapes visible only in uncertain fluidity. The opening line also positions the speaker between sleeping and wakefulness, in an indeterminate space between the unconscious desires of dreams and their circumscription in reality. Here, in the pre-dawn hours, the speaker's love — 'It is she' — appears to her, swooning. Again the presence of desire conjures death explicitly — 'As sweet as love, as soft as death'. Unlike



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in 'Sinfonia Eroica', where sexual intimacy is represented orgasmically through music, here an 'em' dash signifies the failure to represent climax.

These literary techniques, like those performed by the symbolists, operate to represent facets of life previously (or continuously) denied by hegemonic discourse. In the introduction to this chapter I suggested that Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life' can be read as an intertext to Levy's essay on Thomson. Indeed, Levy's essay positions Thomson as a poet of modern life. She writes that 'James Thomson is essentially the poet of mood; he has symbolised, as no poet has done before him, a certain phase of modern feeling, I was going to say modern pessimism, but the word scarcely covers the sense' (502). The city that Thomson conjures 'rises before us, a picture distinct, real in itself, real in the force of its symbolic meaning' (503). Clearly inspired by the Symbolist movement, and pondering how to value and give authority to minor works and poets, Levy proposes that

[t]he value of the poem does not lie in isolated passages, in pregnant lines which catch the ear and eye and linger in the memory; it is as a complete conception, as a marvellously truthful expression of what it is almost impossible to express at all, that we must value it. And the truthfulness is none the less that it has been expressed to a great extent by means of symbols; the nature of the subject is such that it is only by resorting to such means that it can be adequately represented. Mood, seen through the medium of such draughtsmanship and painter's skill, is no longer a dream, a shadow which the sunbeams shall disperse, but one side of a truth. (505)

Levy is writing here of Thomson's representation of what she called 'grey pain' — major depression, a state of being that continues to elide representation. Yet, in the late nineteenth century, female same-sex desire also resisted representation. Levy captures the incoherent pleasures of same-sex desire in 'A Wall Flower' and 'Borderland'. Most forcefully rendered through the musical climax in 'Sinfonia Eroica', symbolism allows Levy to represent desires which have been largely denied by language and law.

Levy notes of Thomson's epic poem that for those who have not wandered the City of Dreadful Night and felt its pain, the poem may have little meaning. Appreciating the power of cultural and intersubjective recognition, she writes that 'he dwells on a view of things which is morbid, nay false, which does not

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exist for the perfectly healthy human being'. Nonetheless, she goes on, 'The fact that a state of mind exists is enough; it is one of the phenomena of our world, as true, as false, as worthy, as unworthy of consideration as any other' (502). It is this impossibility of recognition from the wider public of Levy's same-sex orientated erotic desires that causes, as Goody phrased it, 'a splitting of subjectivity into disparate fragments' ('Passing' 175).

Scholars have often focused upon the 'triple marginalisation' of Levy: her female gender, her Jewishness, and her non-heterosexuality, and though here she references the self-experience or recognition of depression required to develop meaning from Thomson's poetry, her critique of the universal can be applied to many aspects of her work which explored culturally incoherent identities, desires and subjectivities. Read queerly, it is the failure of society to recognise female same-sex desire in 'At a Dinner Party' that gives the poem its erotic politics and performs the cultural critique of the type evidenced in the Thomson essay. As Judith Butler has explored, this incoherence and unintelligibility continues to be an attribute of the queer subject today. The queer is still the minor. Subjective coherence enables a speaking position through which an effective form of agency can be wrought. To be recognised is to be allowed to speak. Yet this coherence also has its limits. Identity is created through discourse and is a normalising, disciplining form of production. It forecloses possibilities for change. Writing in a proto-lesbian era, Levy's work is valuable for its attempts to negotiate and theorise agency and change despite, or even through, a poetics of misrecognition. It is here, in its poetics and its politics, that Amy Levy produced fine queer work.

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