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‘Cosmopolitan Disturbances: Amy Levy in Dresden’

Ana Parejo Vadillo

‘Spare the strangeness’

Amy Levy, ‘Medea’ (1881)

At the heart of Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) is his essay on the German art critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a leading figure in German Romanticism. Here, Pater quotes Hegel to reconstruct Winckelmann’s aesthetic enlightenment, styling Hegel’s words in order to transform Winckelmann into an iconic figure for *fin-de-siècle* British culture: “Winckelmann by contemplation of the ideal works of the ancients received a sort of inspiration through which he opened a new sense for the study of art. He is to be regarded as one of those who in the sphere of art have known how to initiate a new organ for the human spirit”.¹ In this description of Winckelmann, Pater encapsulated all that aestheticism stood for at the end of the nineteenth century: the return to Hellenism, the revival of eighteenth-century aesthetics, the elevation of criticism to an art form, and last, but not least, the modern appreciation of the antique. But if the essence of Pater’s essay was to show that Winckelmann turned Germany towards ancient Greek culture, thereby inaugurating a new form of perceiving the aesthetic – in short, a new Renaissance – , then Pater also laid bare an important detail: that it was Dresden that turned Winckelmann into an art scholar and an aesthete. He writes thus of Winckelmann’s encounter with Dresden’s cultural life: ‘And now there opened for him a new way of communion with the Greek life.’ In contact with the life that is ‘still fervent in the relics of plastic art’, Winckelmann experiences liberation and rapture. ‘On a sudden’, Pater writes, ‘the imagination feels itself free.’²

¹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 146. Donald L. Hill notes that ‘Pater translates selectively from the Introduction to Hegel’s *Aesthetik*, ed. H. G. Hotho, 2d ed. (Berlin 1842), I, 81.’ See Walter Pater, *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 413.

² Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 153.

Before its destruction by the allies in 1945 in the infamous bombing that brought the city to ruins, Dresden (the ‘Florence of the North’ as it was also known), was a common destination for cultured tourists. At the turn of the twentieth century, the city was particularly favoured by British aesthetes, avant-garde artists, and writers who proclaimed the importance of beauty and relished in the arts of the past. They flocked to Dresden to see the historic city and its extraordinary collections in their search for creative material and intellectual energy. Appreciating Wagner in his own land and studying the Old Masters in the Gemäldegalerie were considered unique aesthetic experiences. From Walter Pater and Amy Levy to Michael Field and Virginia Woolf, British writers travelled to Dresden to undergo a kind of awakening akin to that experienced by Winckelmann. Dresden was also a city where a ‘sentimental traveller’ (of the kind re-imagined by Vernon Lee) could find others of a similar sensibility, identifying with the spirit of antiquity as it had been revived at the time.³

This article concentrates on the influence of Dresden on the Jewish, New Woman writer, and aesthete Amy Levy (1861-1889), who is best known today for her experimental London Jewish novel, *Reuben Sachs* (1888), and her urban lyrics. Discussions of Levy’s relationship to the concept of *polis* are not new in Levy scholarship,⁴ and yet there has been no consideration of her as a cosmopolitan. As we shall see, the crux of Levy’s trip was the juxtaposition of Dresden as a liberating cosmopolitan space with her disturbing experience of

³ Vernon Lee, ‘On Modern Travelling’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 69 (1 November 1893), 306-311 (p. 307). Lee borrows the term from Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768).

⁴ See for example Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘Amy Levy in Bloomsbury’, in *Woman Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 38-77; Linda Hunt Beckman ‘Amy Levy, Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation, and the Fin-de-Siècle Woman Poet’, in Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Fin de Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 207-230; and Richa Dwor “‘Poor old Palace-Prison!’: Jewish Urban Memory in Amy Levy’s ‘The Ghetto at Florence’”, *Partial Answers*, 13/1 (2015), 155-169.

the city in the context of antisemitism which, in the political discourse of the period, was framed within an anti-cosmopolitan, nationalist ideology. This essay traces how Levy's writings were shaped by this trip, as she experienced the cosmopolitan as two distinctly opposing forces: one progressive and liberating, the other oppressive and destructive.

Central to Levy's vision of the cosmopolitan is her awareness of what it means to be a stranger, a deeply significant term for British aesthetes. As a Jewish, feminist, and lesbian writer, Levy understood too well Pater's portrait of the aesthete as 'a lover of strange souls', the central tenet of 'Leonardo da Vinci', another key essay in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.⁵ In Dresden, however, Levy came face to face with its cosmopolitan ideological reverse: hostility towards the stranger. This essay begins with Levy's letters from Dresden in which we see her in a cosmopolitan landscape. In an effort to recover the political implications of Levy's writings and her perception of the politics of the stranger, the second part then analyses the effect cosmopolitanism had on her play 'Medea', where I show that Levy's use of Greek drama is politically motivated. I finish with some thoughts about Levy and her vision of *polis* as *cosmopolis*.

I. Letters from a Cosmopolitan

The second British Jewish woman ever to go to university in the United Kingdom, poet and would-be novelist Amy Levy left Newnham College, Cambridge in 1881 without sitting for her Tripos. At the age of nineteen and with her first book – the Greek inspired *Xantippe and Other Poems* (1881) – just out, she set off for Dresden. It is crucial to give weight to this very first trip abroad because it transformed her into the poet and writer we recognize today (in later years she would travel to Switzerland, France, Germany, and Italy). Dresden opened her up to German poetics, to the German language, and to an uncomfortable vision of the world

⁵ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, pp. 90-122 (p. 92).

framed by gender, religion, nationhood, and race. It is not that Levy had not experienced these issues before in London and Cambridge, as her biographers Linda Hunt Beckman and Christine Pullen have argued. Rather, it is that as a foreign traveller Levy could take up, without uneasiness, the position of the stranger in foreign lands.⁶

Only seven surviving manuscript letters account for her trip to Dresden, five of which have been edited and published by Beckman in her biography of the poet.⁷ Those seven letters, addressed either to her mother or to her sister Katie, are rich in information and explain why Dresden would play such a large part in the construction of Levy as a cosmopolitan New Woman and as an aesthetic writer, including her own image as a published author. In a letter dated 3 November 1881, for example, a week before her twentieth birthday, Levy explains that she has gone to a photographer's studio to have her portrait made. 'I think I am considered rather beautiful here than otherwise!' she writes. Her *carte de visite* was also made in Dresden in 1882 at the Atelier Robert Eich, a well-known Dresden photographer.⁸ At a time when, as she boasted to her mother, people at Newnham College Cambridge were reading her *Xantippe* in a newly formed poetry club, Levy must have presumably wanted these pictures to be made as a sign of her independence and authorship.⁹ The poets Katharine

⁶ Linda Hunt Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); Christine Pullen, *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy* (London: Kingston University Press, 2010).

⁷ The published letters are dated: 4 October 1881 [Beckman inaccurately dates it as 4 December 1881]; 10 November 1881; 27 November 1881; 2 December 1881; and 8 December 1881 (Beckman, pp. 232-238). Two further unpublished letters from Dresden exist: one dated 3 November 1881 addressed to her mother and another addressed to her sister, Katie. This second letter is not dated and has a small section deliberately cut out. They are all archived at Camellia Plc., part of Linton Park Plc. The correspondence suggests that more letters were exchanged between Levy, her family, and friends during this period. It is unclear whether they have been lost or were destroyed. Errors in Beckman's transcriptions have been corrected for the sake of accuracy.

⁸ The photograph dates of 1882 and is inscribed 'Amy Levy, 1882'. See Pullen, p. 212.

⁹ Beckman, p. 233.

Bradley and Edith Cooper would do the same a few years later, also in Dresden, commissioning their joint *carte de visite* as the aesthetic poet ‘Michael Field’.¹⁰

Levy’s letters play out her fight for independence from parental scrutiny and gender constraints, as she acquired distance from the locality of her London Jewish home. She travelled to Dresden with a friend from college, ‘Madge’,¹¹ and more friends from Cambridge were expected to join them in the spring of 1882. She lodged at a central pension at 15 Lüttichau Straße (today Hans-Dankner-Straße), a street well known to music pilgrims because Franz Liszt had lived in number 14 in 1854. Her intention was to stay in the city until Easter 1882, which in that year fell in April. The tone of her letters is both melancholic and comic. They are vividly suggestive of Levy’s foray into the philosophy of pessimism advocated by Arthur Schopenhauer, fully developed in her work after 1881. (Levy mentions specifically the ‘philosophy’ of ‘sad’ ‘Schopenhauer’ in ‘To E.’, the last poem of *A London Plane-Tree*, which ends with the lines ‘Beneath an alien sod; on me / The cloud descends’).¹² She writes in one of these early letters: ‘I don’t like being twenty at all; I think my arrival in the world was rather an unfortunate occurrence for everyone concerned.’¹³ But they are also full of ingenious descriptions of the people she met, mostly foreigners staying in the same pension. ‘They are bent upon seeing everything they can’, she writes, ‘rise at cock-crow for the galleries & go to some place of amusement in the evening.’¹⁴ She writes to her sister Katie:

¹⁰ See my ‘Living Art: Michael Field, Aestheticism and Dress’ in Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (eds), *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 243-71.

¹¹ For issues regarding the identity of ‘Madge’, see Pullen, p. 212, fn. 98.

¹² Amy Levy, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1889), pp. 92-4 (p. 94).

¹³ Beckman, p. 233.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

‘We continue to marvel at everything we see & hear’.¹⁵ The letters are at times opaque about Levy’s immersion within Dresden cultural life, but they show her mingling with other travellers. She enters local Dresden circles, engaging with English expatriates and the Dresden Jewish community. Despite her mother’s opposition, she continues her studies in Greek by taking a tutor, ‘a Cambridge man’.¹⁶ She starts teaching English but her mother forces her to drop the job because her students are young men.¹⁷ Levy was very fond of music and used her time in Dresden to go to concerts, most notably Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman* (*Der fliegende Holländer*) – and it appears that Wagner himself heard the opera in Dresden in 1881.¹⁸ She attends a Beethoven concert with other residents in the pension,¹⁹ and continues to practice music (she buys a book of children’s music by Schumann, presumably his *Album for the Young* [*Album für die Jugend*], ‘for strumming purposes’).²⁰ She wants to master German and starts a language course. She reads German literature (in the original) at the Public Library. She becomes a member of the Dresden Shakespeare club and attends meetings of a literary society, performing in some *tableaux vivants* at the house of a Dresden poetess:²¹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁷ ‘I did secure those boys as pupils but was allowed to teach them. Don’t you call that simply absurd?’ Letter dated 8 December 1881, in Beckman, p. 238.

¹⁸ *The Flying Dutchman* was premiered at the Dresden Court Theatre on 2 January 1843. See Henry T. Finck, *Wagner and His Works: The Story of His Life with Critical Comments*, 2 vols (1893; New York: Haskell House Publishers 1968), I, p. 118. In the unpublished Dresden letter of 3 November 1881, Levy writes that she is going to see the opera that week.

¹⁹ Beckman, p. 236.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²¹ There is an error in Beckman’s transcription here. The manuscript reads ‘poetess’, not poet.

This morning I attended a meeting in connection with some tableau[x] vivants in wh. I am to take part. It was held at the house of a Dresden poetess – a very rich & very vain old woman, whose house is got up in imitation of a Venetian palace & adorned with her own portraits, wreaths, & works (richly bound). She is very funny – her vanity is quite a disease, I think. There is also to be a dance after the tableau[x] vivants wh. are given by a literary club where I have been several times.²²

This poetess is not named, but may be the Jewish German feminist fiction writer Fanny Lewald (1811-89), the most famous woman writer living in Dresden during this period and a champion of female and Jewish emancipation, who had participated in the 1848 revolution. Lewald was well connected to German exiles living in London, including Karl Marx and Karl Blind.²³ It is important to note that a common trait in Lewald's fiction was the use of *tableaux vivants*, as Peter McIsaac has recently shown in his discussion of Lewald's novel *Jenny*.²⁴ But Lewald was not a poet, and thus it is also possible that the unnamed 'poetess' Levy refers to was the Russian poet and translator Karolina Pavlova (1807-93), a cosmopolitan, multilingual writer rediscovered by the Symbolists in the early 1900s, who had lived in Dresden since 1858.²⁵ Almost nothing is known of Pavlova during the last few years of her life, other than

²² Beckman, p. 233.

²³ Their daughters, Eleanor Marx and Mathilde Blind would become Levy's friends.

²⁴ See Peter M. McIsaac, 'Rethinking Tableaux Vivants and Triviality in the Writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johanna Schopenhauer, and Fanny Lewald', *Monatshefte*, 99/2 (2007), 152-176.

²⁵ See Diana Greene, *Reinventing Romantic Poetry: Russian Women Poets of the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 144. I would like to thank Diana Green for her help with my research on Pavlova.

that she was almost destitute for a period, but in poems like 'Dresden' she defined herself as an alien, a poet in exile.²⁶

Levy's experiences in Dresden are at the heart of her turn to the urban as an aesthetic in which the lyrical is confronted by national, racial, and even racist conflicts. Levy embodied two opposite views of cosmopolitanism. One aesthetic and politically liberating which, in the manner of Kant, regarded all individuals as 'citizens of a universal state of mankind', and which was based on Kant's idea of hospitality as developed in his 1795 treatise *Towards Perpetual Peace*.²⁷ 'Hospitality', Kant argued, 'indicates the Right of a stranger in consequence of his arrival on the soil of another country, not to be treated by its citizens as an enemy.' He added: 'as long as he conducts himself peacefully in the place where he may happen to be, he is not to be dealt with in a hostile manner.'²⁸ This idea was translated at the *fin de siècle* into an aesthetic world of floating, mobile, international communities, whose individuals were followers of ideals of beauty that formed and reconfigured themselves in kaleidoscopic fashion in cities of culture. But Levy also embodied another understanding of cosmopolitanism, one that was tied to her Jewishness. As Michael L. Miller and Scott Ury write: 'as a diasporic people, Jews were often viewed as quintessential cosmopolitans'.²⁹

²⁶ Olga Briker, 'The traveler-exile in Karolina Pavlova's *Phantasmagoria*', in Susanne Fusso and Alexander Lehrman (eds), *Essays on Karolina Pavlova* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), pp.135-154 (p. 147).

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in *Kant's Principles of Politics*, ed. and trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891) pp. 77-118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100-101.

²⁹ Michael L. Miller and Scott Ury, 'Cosmopolitanism: the end of Jewishness?', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 17/3 (2010), 337-359 (p. 344).

Levy lived in Dresden at a crucial point in the history of German antisemitism, a movement whose ideology was distinctly anti-cosmopolitan.³⁰ In the wake of the crisis of liberalism and capitalism, triggered by the 1873 crash of the Viennese stock exchange, antisemitism had been reactivated in Germany. Dresden was a hotbed of antisemitism in the late 1870s and early 1880s.³¹ In 1879 Alexander Pinkert founded in Dresden the antisemitic *Deutscher Reformverein*, which prepared the way for the first International Antisemitic Congress, held in Dresden in September 1882.³² At this Congress, the radical antisemitic politician Ernst Henrici, who had founded the Soziale Reichspartei (Social Reich Party) in 1880, demanded that all Jews be expelled from Germany.³³ In its ‘Manifesto to the Governments and Peoples of the Christian Nations Threatened by Judaism’ the Congress declared: ‘The foreign race is the Jewish race’. Looking for ‘the solution of the Jewish question’, the Congress condemned cosmopolitanism as a form of national patricide, the result of a selfish individualism: ‘As a cosmopolitan, the Jew adheres to the principle: *ubi*

³⁰ Though a recent term of reference, anti-cosmopolitanism is not a recent ideology. See Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), especially his chapter ‘The Politics of Politics: On the Dialectic of Cosmopolitanization and Anti-Cosmopolitanization’, pp. 99-130.

³¹ On antisemitism in Dresden, see Gerald Kolditz, ‘Zur Entwicklung des Antisemitismus in Dresden während des Kaiserreichs’, *Dresdner Hefte*, 45 (1996), 37–45; Rudolf Heinze, ‘Dresden’ in *Verfassung und Verfassungsorganisation der Städte*, vol. 4/1 (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1905), pp. 85–122.

³² See Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Anti-Semitism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 94. See also James Retallack, ‘Conservatives and Antisemites in Baden and Saxony’, *German History*, 17/4 (1999), 507-526 (p. 523); and his ‘Antisocialism and Electoral Politics in Regional Perspective: The Kingdom of Saxony’, in Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack (eds), *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.49-91 (p. 66).

³³ See William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 136-7.

bene, ibi patria (“where it’s best, there is the fatherland”). Consequently, the Jew cannot be a patriot attached by love, devotion, and self-sacrifice to the soil upon which he was born and that was tilled by the sweat of his brow.’³⁴ Levy will touch upon these concerns in her highly polemical novel, *Reuben Sachs* (1888), a novel about a young Jewish man, who fulfils his political ambition by becoming a conservative MP, only to die of nervous exhaustion. ‘Vote for Sachs’, hails his community, ‘the people’s friend!’³⁵ The novel was translated into German by Regenia (Zadek) Bernstein, wife of German Jewish Socialist Edouard Bernstein (and not by Eleanor Marx as has been believed) and published in the socialist periodical *Die Neue Zeit*.³⁶

In one of her more candid letters, her first from Dresden, Levy reveals her conflicted position with regards to the Dresden Jewish community and the antisemitic movement in Germany:

³⁴ *Manifest an die Regierungen und Völker der durch das Judenthum gefährdeten christlichen Staaten laut Beschlusses des Ersten Internationalen Antijüdischen Kongresses zu Dresden am 11. und 12. September 1882* (Chemnitz: Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner, 1882), pp. 1-14, available in an English translation by Erwin Fink at http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=581 [accessed 25/07/2016]. Recent work on ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ and on cosmopolitanism and patriotism from critics such as Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah has offered a response to this turn-of-the-century vision of the cosmopolitan as anti-patriotic, which was directly linked to the emergence of Nazism and other twentieth-century totalitarianisms. See for example Martha Nussbaum, ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’. *Boston Review*, 19/5 (1994), 3-16; and Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots’, *Critical Inquiry*, 23/ 3 (1997), 617-39.

³⁵ Amy Levy, *Reuben Sachs. A Sketch* (London: Macmillan, 1888), p. 245.

³⁶ See Till Schelz-Brandenburg (ed.), *Eduard Bernsteins Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky (1891-1895)* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2011), p. 12., fn. 7. I would like to thank Flore Janssen for her help with the translation of this book.

Please tell Mama that I went to Synagogue yesterday -& a beastly place it was. Zion unventilated & unrefreshed sent forth an odour wh. made me feel Luidery [?] for the rest of the day. The place was crammed with evil-looking Hebrews. Lots of the shops were shut yesterday [...] This afternoon we call on the Sulzbergers – some wealthy Hebrews of our ‘acquaintance’ who, for Js, don’t seem half bad. I say, ‘for Js’ because the German Hebrew makes me feel, as a rule, that the Anti-Semitic movement is a most just & virtuous one.³⁷

The troubling frankness of these lines has moved critics to consider Levy’s language in the context of ‘Jewish self-hatred’ or as an example of Levy’s ‘double consciousness’ as a Jewish woman reproducing the racial language of the period while distancing herself from it.³⁸

Criticism has not linked Levy’s words to the antisemitic movement in Germany, which she must have observed and felt at firsthand. Levy was well informed about current antisemitic writing in Germany. She consciously uses the word ‘Anti-Semitic’, a term made popular by Wilhelm Marr’s inflammatory 1879 pamphlet ‘The Victory of Jewry over Germandom’.³⁹

The letter also echoes one of the most controversial and influential antisemitic texts of their period, ‘Unsere Aussichten’ [‘Our Views’] (first published as an essay in 1879, and reprinted in subsequent years as a pamphlet), by the Dresden-born Heinrich von Treitschke, whose position as Professor of History at the University of Berlin helped legitimize antisemitic

³⁷ Beckman, p. 236. Beckman wrongly transcribes it as ‘Sulzburgers’. In the Dresden directory for 1881, there is a Sulzberger, whose occupation is identified as ‘Bereinigte Fabriten Photo. Papiere’.

³⁸ Beckman, p. 110; Susan David Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, in Amy Levy, *Reuben Sachs*, ed. Susan Bernstein (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), pp.11-43 (p. 37).

³⁹ Wilhelm Marr, *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (Bern: Rudolph Costenoble, 1879). The League of Antisemites was founded by Marr in 1879.

attitudes and antisemitic language.⁴⁰ Levy's ironic remarks, 'some wealthy Hebrews of our 'acquaintance' who, for Js, don't seem half bad', draws on Treitschke's division of Jewry along national lines: 'good' (Jewish) Frenchmen, Englishmen and Italians (people of 'pure blood' that have 'adapted rather easily to Western ways') and German-Polish Jews (who 'scarred by centuries of Christian tyranny' are 'more alien to the European and, especially, the German essence').⁴¹ While Levy's vision of the German Hebrews satirically replicates the discourse of the Dresden antisemitic movement, her closeness to that discourse in this letter is disturbing. Bearing in mind that Levy was agnostic, what comes through these lines is Levy's disaffection with the idea of closed Jewish communities, who, in their effort to maintain their identity remain untouched by modernity. Levy wrote this letter the day after the Yom Kippur festival.⁴² Her comment 'Lots of the shops were shut yesterday', which comes directly after her most racially explicit outburst against German Hebrews, seems to suggest that in Levy's mind, religion produces a conservative community.

This letter brings out the tension between Levy's Jewish, British, cosmopolitan, and female identities. Fresh in Levy's mind must have been that Benjamin Disraeli, Jewish by birth, had been British Prime Minister until April 1880. Her comments thus relate to national politics too, as she sees British Judaism as more politically advanced. Levy is thus making a

⁴⁰ Heinrich von Treitschke, 'Unsere Aussichten' ['Our Views'], *Preußische Jahrbücher* [*Prussian Yearbooks*], 44, Heft 5 (November 1879), 559–576; available in an English translation by Richard S. Levy at http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/411_Treitschke_Jews%20are%20Misfortune_112.pdf [accessed 15/1/2017]. Treitschke's antisemitic language caught on very quickly. His remark 'The Jews are our misfortune!' would have harmful consequences in the twentieth century.

⁴¹ Treitschke, p. 3.

⁴² This letter is dated 4 October 1881 (not 4 December 1881, as it appears in Beckman's edition). In 1881, the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in Judaism, was celebrated on 3 October 1881. Levy is clearly referring to this religious day.

point about Jewish modernity, what it means to be a modern Jew, and a modern British Jewish woman. For her, the letter seems to suggest, what modernity means is firstly a separation of the religious and the national that embraces the truly cosmopolitan (in *Reuben Sachs* she will criticize the ‘provincial minds’ of the London Jewish community).⁴³ Equally, it also means the social, economic, and political emancipation of women from the constraints of conservative religious ideology, both at home and abroad.

II. A Dresden Poet

Given these conflicting experiences of liberation and rejection, it is not surprising that Dresden is the Trojan horse of Levy’s cosmopolitan poetics. After Dresden, Levy only published two further books of poems, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884) and *A London Plane-Tree and Other Poems* (1889). Both of these are haunted by the spirit of Dresden. The frontispiece of the first edition of *A Minor Poet* has the subtitle and place of publication in German Gothic typeface. Levy was a London poet, and her lyric work was inspired by the topography (intellectual, geographical, and emotional) of London and its inhabitants. Yet not only were many of the poems included in these two volumes written in Dresden, but both collections also explore complex feelings of liberation, immersion, alienation, and rejection. These two books illustrate what Levy means by being in the world. *A Minor Poet* and *A London Plane-Tree* are the existentialist vision of a minor poet as she relates to the world. Adjusting the lens of Levy’s writing to Dresden allows us to see Levy’s vision of the cosmopolitan and to trace its development in her writings.

In his review of *A Minor Poet*, the Jewish scholar James Darmesteter, who would meet and later marry Levy’s friend and another London poet A. Mary F. Robinson, noted that with the exception of the reprinted ‘Xantippe’, most of the poems in the collection belonged

⁴³ Levy, *Reuben Sachs*, p. 97.

to the school of pessimism.⁴⁴ German pessimism (mostly Schopenhauer) is at the centre of Levy's poetics, and would remain so until the end of her career. Many of the poems included in *A Minor Poet*, are intimate, melancholic reflections of her feelings of marginality. 'Sinfonia Eroica' and 'To Sylvia', both written in Dresden, explore the confines of lesbian love through the theme of music (Beethoven, Schubert). The overall sentiment of the collection is the idea of life as something that is foreign and alien. Life's meaning and final end cannot be grasped by the melancholic self. Levy's poetic influences are the existentialist poet James Thompson (particularly his *City of Dreadful Night*), the exiled Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, and the Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau, whose poetics reflected a lifelong history of depression (he had a complete breakdown in 1844). She shows her debt to Lenau in poems such as 'The Sick Man and the Nightingale' and 'To Death'. Other pessimist poems include 'A Dirge' (a rewriting of Heine's 'Mein Herz, mein Herz ist traurig'), 'A Farewell' (subtitled 'After Heine'), and 'A Cross-Road Epitaph' (after Heine's 'Am Kreuzweg wird begraben'). These are poems about a wish not to live, about not wanting to be in the world.

Levy deals more explicitly with what it means to be unwanted in the verse-play 'Medea', the central poem of *A Minor Poet*, perhaps Levy's most sustained analysis and darkest vision of cosmopolitanism, and arguably her most political – if not polemical – work. In this collection, anti-cosmopolitanism appears as the flip side of pessimism; it is an examination of what it means to be unwanted-in-the-world by others. Levy wrote the first draft in Dresden in 1882, finishing the play in Lucerne, Switzerland, either later in 1882 or 1883.⁴⁵ As Josephine McDonagh has shown, this verse drama is one of a number of late-Victorian re-creations by women writers of Euripides' play which deal with the phenomenon

⁴⁴ James Darmesteter, 'Chronique Anglaise', *La Revue Politique et Littéraire: Revue de Cours Littéraires* (11 October 1884), 474-5.

⁴⁵ For the dating of the finished play see Beckman, p. 239, and Pullen, p. 213.

of child murder.⁴⁶ Critics have also highlighted that Levy, like other women poets of the period, reworked the classical Greek play as a conscious act of aesthetic positioning and as a political feminist re-appropriation of the lyric.⁴⁷ More recently T. D. Olverson has convincingly argued for a racial reading of the play. She suggests that Levy was inspired by the Austrian Romantic poet Franz Grillparzer, who in *Medea*, the third play of his trilogy *Das goldene Vlies (The Golden Fleece, 1821)*, portrays Medea as a black woman.⁴⁸ Olverson points out that Levy was reading Grillparzer at the time of composition of *Medea*, publishing her translation of Grillparzer's *Sappho* in *The Cambridge Review* in 1882. But, as Olverson also notes, the similarities between the plays are 'not structural or technical'.⁴⁹ Whilst I agree with Olverson's insistence that we should read the play in racial terms, Levy's play was much closer in conception and structure to Euripides' than to Grillparzer's. Plot-wise, they are significantly different. More influential, it seems to me, was her immersion in Dresden culture and politics.

⁴⁶ Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 164-70.

⁴⁷ Works dealing with this aspect of women poets and classical Greek include Edith Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War', *Greece & Rome*, 46/1 (1999), 42-77; Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, 'Medea and Mid-Victorian Marriage Legislation', in *Greek Tragedy and British Theatre 1660-1914*, ed. Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 391-429. See too Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (forthcoming)

⁴⁸ T. D. Olverson, "'Such Are Not Woman's Thoughts': Amy Levy's 'Xantippe' and 'Medea'", in Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman (eds), *Amy Levy: Critical Essays* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 100-134 (p. 122).

⁴⁹ Olverson, p. 125.

Levy's 'Medea' begins with a melancholic Medea missing her home as she feels the hostility of Greek citizens towards her. What is the power of beauty she asks 'When all around the air is charged and chill, / And the place is drear and dark with hate?' 'Alas, alas', she exclaims,

this people loves me not!

This strong, fair people, marble-cold and smooth
As modelled marble. I, an alien here,
That well can speak the language of their lips,
The language of their souls may never learn.
And in their hands, I, that did know myself
Ere now, a creature in whose veins ran blood
Redder, more rapid, than flows round most hearts,
Do seem a creature reft of life and soul.⁵⁰

It is not that the Greeks are 'unloving', she goes on: 'Oft I see the men and women walking in their ways / hand in hand, and tender-bated breath.' It is that they are, in Kant's terms, inhospitable towards foreigners. Greeks hate and fear Medea, who only wants to receive something of their love: 'O men and women, are ye then so hard? Will ye not give a little of your love / to me that am so hungry?'⁵¹

Levy's Medea is ethnically marked as a foreigner. The two terms used most frequently to describe Medea in the play are stranger and alien. Unexpectedly, Levy uses the Germanic

⁵⁰ Amy Levy, 'Medea', in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), pp. 31-58 (pp. 34-35).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

word 'swart' instead of the English 'black' to describe Medea. She puts the words in the lips of Greek citizens as they describe Medea to mark ethnic, racial hostility:

Nikias.

I like not your swart skins and purple hair;
Your black, fierce eyes where the brows meet across.
By all the gods! when yonder Colchian
Fixes me with her strange and sudden gaze,
Each hair upon my body stands erect!
Zeus, 'tis a very tiger, and as mute!

Ægeus.

'Tis certain that the woman's something strange.

Nikias.

Gods, spare me your strange women, so say I.
Give me gold hair, lithe limbs and gracious smiles,
And spare the strangeness.⁵²

Levy was a Hellenist before travelling to Germany but Dresden turned her into a Jewish, heretical Hellenist.⁵³ As a foreigner, Medea is condemned to remain always an outsider, as she notes: '[f]rom human fellowship cut off'.⁵⁴ Written against the backdrop of the Russian pogroms triggered by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March 1881 which resulted in Jewish mass emigration, as well as in the context of the Dresden antisemitic movement

⁵² Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁵³ See Shanyn Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008).

⁵⁴ Levy, 'Medea', p. 41.

discussed above, 'Medea' becomes a meditation on anti-cosmopolitanism. She is demonized as a citizen of Colchis (Russia in the nineteenth century, today Georgia) and is described as a feared oriental, with physical attributes pertaining to late-Victorian antisemitic discourses ('This woman was dark and evil in her soul').⁵⁵ Jason, also a foreigner in the land, but Greek, sends her and their mixed-race sons to exile so that he can fulfill his political ambition by marrying the King's daughter, the 'gold-hair'd Glaukê'.⁵⁶ Unloved by the Greeks, betrayed and forced into exile by her husband Jason, Medea turns against Jason's nationalistic, purist, antisemitic vision of the state by killing Jason's wife to-be and, more horrifically, Medea's very own children.

To remember Dresden in this verse play is to pose the question of whether assimilation is possible within the context of the rise of anti-cosmopolitanism, also considered in 1881 as antisemitism. In 'Medea', Levy presents a dark future: ideals of assimilation are violently destroyed by both Medea and Jason. In a perverse way, it is the reader who wills assimilation for the future. To read the play is to feel compassionate for Medea but to reject utterly both Jason's vision and Medea's solutions. At the end of the play, the reader is left with a darkness that just cannot be accepted. Those familiar with Euripides' play will immediately notice the different endings. While in Euripides, Medea is saved by Helios, in Levy's play Medea wanders in exile, alone, withdrawing into the darkness that is outside and inside of her. Unlike Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, no love will ever wait for Medea, perhaps only compassion.

The return to the polis: A Coda

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

We have seen how Dresden politicized Levy's cosmopolitan aestheticism. Levy's vision of the cosmopolitan would remain unresolved, punctuated by some optimistic moments.

Remarkable is her 1886 essay 'The Ghetto at Florence': she loves Florence because there one cannot distinguish the Florentine from the Jew.⁵⁷ And despite the ambivalent ending of *Reuben Sachs*, she nonetheless presents assimilation, albeit problematically, as a path towards modernization: the heroine of the novel, Judith Quixano, is pregnant with a child that will be of mixed heritage.

Walter Benjamin reminds us that in *Matière et mémoire* (1896), Henri Bergson argued that experience is 'a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data'.⁵⁸ It is thus useful to conclude by looking very briefly at Levy's last book of verse, *A London Plane-Tree* (1889). In the midst of her lyrical exploration of London under the title 'Love, Dreams and Death', Levy returned strangely to the city of Dresden in 'The Birch-Tree at Loschwitz', a poem that mirrored the central poem of the book 'A London Plane-Tree':

AT Loschwitz above the city

The air is sunny and chill;

The birch trees and the pine trees

Grow thick upon the hill.

Lone and tall, with silver stem,

A birch tree stands apart;

The passionate wind of spring-time

⁵⁷ Amy Levy, 'The Ghetto at Florence', *Jewish Chronicle* (26 March 1886), p. 9.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 155-200 (p. 159).

Stirs in its leafy heart.

I lean against the birch tree,
My arms around it twine;
It pulses, and leaps, and quivers,
Like a human heart to mine.

One moment I stand, then sudden
Let loose mine arms that cling:
O God! the lonely hillside,
The passionate wind of spring!⁵⁹

Her invocation of Dresden in her 1889 London book of poems does not displace London as a cosmopolitan centre; instead it is suggestive of Levy's efforts to reconcile her vision of the cosmopolitan by allowing the singular and differentiated to be assimilated. In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida argues for a return to the Kantian notion of hospitality, but also based on the Greek idea of polis. He asks for modern metropolises to become 'cities of refuge.'⁶⁰ After considering the effects of the inhospitable in 'Medea', Levy's Dresden-in-London poem may suggest a utopian cosmopolitanism firmly grounded, like the birch-tree, in a cosmopolitan polis. And yet, in this, her very last book of poems, whose proofs she corrected fifteen days before committing suicide in her London home, Levy seems to have remained, if not skeptical, detached.

⁵⁹ Levy, *A London Plane-Tree*, p. 40.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 5.