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For over two decades now Broadview Editions has continued the project of re-evaluating the canon since the investigation seriously began under second-wave feminist scholars twenty years earlier. The late-Victorian, Anglo-Jewish writer Amy Levy is one of the most recent additions to Broadview’s growing rare-author library, and hence, a new candidate up for inclusion into what constitutes a representative and valuable late-Victorian literature. Broadview wasn’t the first publishing house to reintroduce this under-read author to a wider audience. In 1993 and again in 2002 the University Press of Florida released *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-89*, and in 2001 Persephone Books—another house specializing in neglected works—published Levy’s short novel *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*. But for less than half the cost of the Florida collection and with extensive editorial aid, Susan David Bernstein’s editions of *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* and *The Romance of a Shop* with Broadview, both released in 2006, are likely to become the favoured editions for academics, students, and general readers.

Originally published in 1888 *Reuben Sachs* was the second of Levy’s three novels. The plot is a tragic romance between the politically ambitious title character and Judith Quixano, a young Jewess from a lower-class family. On the surface it is seems harmless and typical of Victorian fiction; but Levy’s scathing portraits of materialism and self-interest in secular Jewish circles, and her frequent reference and use of derogative Jewish stereotypes brought its author much critical backlash. In fact, as Bernstein tells us in her detailed introduction, many of Levy’s early readers and critics simply assumed that the hostility she received because of this “sketch” resulted in her suicide some months later while preparing a collection of poetry for publication (17); she was only twenty-eight. For readers today, still, it is the ways in which Levy unapologetically tackles what was known as the “Jewish Question” during her lifetime that makes *Reuben Sachs* probably her most important work.

The Anglo-Jewish culture of late nineteenth-century London was complex and multifarious. For a point of entry in her introduction Bernstein borrows W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of the double-consciousness of African-Americans to explain the tension between Levy’s culture and her religion (12-3). Raised in a wealthy, acculturated Jewish family who arrived in England several generations earlier, Levy was at a distance from her Jewish roots and traditions; for Levy this emphasized the discrepancy between her inherited faith and the culture she was in contact with day-to-day (14). As she wrote in one of her many essays on Anglo-Jewish relations, the modern Jew, like herself, was “both within and without the tribal limits” (11). However, Levy’s gender complicates this tension further. Rather than only two competing loyalties Levy’s life and work seems to have really hinged on a difficult negotiation between three facets to her identity: her Jewishness, her Englishness, and her feminist concerns. When defending the rights of Jews she was pitted against her Anglo-Saxon culture; when standing up for women’s rights she was forced to critique the patriarchal Jewish community around her; and if she endorsed the modern English society which seemed to be granting women more freedoms, she would inadvertently...
be supporting the same culture that was slow to re-evaluate its opinion of her race and religion.

Bernstein’s introduction and six appendixes offer readers an extensive coverage of these and other dilemmas. While Levy’s youth might have “coincided with the most visible period of Anglo-Jewish emancipation” in Britain (22), English opinion and even Jewish opinion of Jews was still very much fuelled by prejudice and fear. Throughout the 1870s Prime Minister Disraeli, a convert from Judaism to Christianity, was accused of racial loyalty to the East over Britain’s own interests in his international affairs (24); a new wave of Jewish immigrants in the 1870s from Eastern Europe fostered tensions between traditional Jews and more secular Jews like Levy’s family (21); the new race science was seeking to empirically validate depreciating views and stereotypes of ‘Jewish’ physiology (215-223); and as Amy Levy wrote in her 1886 essay “The Jew in Fiction”—included by Bernstein in the appendixes—there was to date in Victorian fiction no “real insight into Jewish character” but only “mere observation of outward peculiarities” (177).

These last two issues centre on the problem of Jewish representation, which stimulated the initial criticism of Levy’s short novel and will probably attract the most attention from readers and scholars today. Why did a Jewish author use familiar Victorian stereotypes to portray Jews in her own novel? For example, when introducing Reuben Sachs the narrator comments,

He was, as I have said, of middle height and slender build. He wore good clothes, but they could not disguise the fact that his figure was bad, and his movements awkward; unmistakably the figure and movements of a Jew. (59)

(There are numerous such remarks, voiced by the narrator and by the characters.) So, was Amy Levy a victim of Jewish self-hatred or is she here impersonating the prejudices of the average Victorian?

Levy’s biographer, Linda Beckman, has suggested that Levy was indeed susceptible to popular anti-Semitic opinions, especially during her adolescence; but she also argues that Levy appeared to have been outgrowing these feelings near the end of her life (Beckman 190-6). In her introduction Bernstein wants to challenge this middle ground stance—which might open the door for reading the novel as a case of Jewish self-loathing—and read comments like the one above as the author’s self-conscious “quotation”, “performing”, or parodying of the dominant cultural ideology (27, 33). The only trouble with this interpretation is the fact that Levy never confirms for us the identity of her narrator’s ‘I’. Is it an outsider or an insider to Judaism?

When describing Reuben Sachs the narrator seems to take for granted English prejudices, but when Reuben joins his family for the Day of Atonement the narrator clearly knows all the ins and outs of Jewish practices that are lost on Bertie Lee-Harrison, a recent convert to Judaism from Christianity (97-8).

In her efforts to read Levy as a satirist or postmodern ironist Bernstein once or twice gets herself into trouble. For example, when she gives us a “trademark” case of Levy’s use of irony to make a political argument Bernstein cites the following passage from one of Levy’s essays:

But I doubt if even the great thought of becoming in time a favourable specimen of the genus ‘maiden-aunt’ would be sufficient to console many a
restless, ambitious woman for the dreary performance of work for which she is quite unsuited, for the quenching of personal hopes for the development of her own intellect. (30)

Levy might be witty here, but not ironic. (If she were being ironic the opening of the sentence ‘But I doubt’ would read something along the lines of ‘Obviously’.) Levy’s narrative certainly demonstrates a double- or even triple-consciousness at work, but perhaps not with the same level of ironic distance or self-awareness that Bernstein sees operating throughout the novel.

That said, it would be difficult—and very offensive—to read *Reuben Sachs* without any narrative irony or without any distance between the author and the narrator. Bernstein’s double-consciousness interpretation, then, might benefit from better contextualizing *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* according to its literary genre. On this issue Bernstein relies on Elaine Showalter who contrasts the innovative and psychological potential of the short story against the realist Victorian novel; by presenting and subtitling her work as a hybrid genre, therefore, Levy was accepting and critiquing ideas about Victorian realism at the same time (33). But, for a work like *Reuben Sachs* that is beginning to investigates multiple and prejudiced points of view, more pertinent is the fact that it slightly predates but looks forward to a spurt fin de siècle novellas that problematize narrative reliability and author-narrator relationships in very similar ways; novellas such as Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911). If Levy wasn’t quite as ahead of her time—as Bernstein believes—for her means of ideological critique, she might have been even more progressive for her narrative technique and style than Bernstein gives her credit for.

But this is only one way of addressing Levy’s complex and controversial novel, and her burgeoning role in late-Victorian and feminist studies. What is important for the time being is that Susan David Bernstein has done some admirable work in re-introducing Amy Levy to a contemporary audience. For those—Victorian scholars predominantly—who already know Levy’s novel Bernstein’s edition is a valuable summary of the criticism and history surrounding *Reuben Sachs*; for those students and readers who have yet to encounter Levy this edition is the most helpful and concise introduction to *Reuben Sachs* available so far. And hopefully, for Amy Levy’s sake, it won’t be the last edition.

Works Cited