The publication of this collection of Sarah Morgan Piatt’s poetry may well be the most important event in nineteenth-century American poetry since Mabel Loomis Todd and Colonel Higginson manhandled Emily Dickinson’s poetry into print. Fortunately, Paula Bernat Bennett’s excellent editorial work reveals Piatt’s work almost as much as Higginson’s obscured Dickinson’s. How good is Piatt? One of the cover blurbs for the book claims that “Piatt is a major figure who deserves a place in the nineteenth-century canon next to Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe.” But this is probably too kind to Poe.

Those familiar with Paula Bernat Bennett’s work over the past decade, and the ongoing effort to recover nineteenth-century American women’s writings, will be familiar with Piatt. She figures prominently in two important anthologies: Karen L. Kilcup’s Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers (1997) and Bennett’s own Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets (1998). With this volume, however, Bennett gives us the first widely available collection of Piatt’s poetry since her work first appeared. Further, Bennett gives us a startling new look at Piatt, who, until Bennett began her work on Piatt, had been seen as a very minor genteel poet of the late 1800s (if seen at all—Piatt to date has not merited entries in such basic reference sources as The Oxford Companion to American Literature or The Dictionary of Literary Biography). However, Bennett has recovered a collection of complex poems—blending sentimental, romantic, and realist aesthetics—which were never collected into book form, appearing only in the political and literary journals in which Piatt originally placed them. This discovery spurred Bennett to go back to Piatt’s books, where she found many poems couched in the guise of the genteel tradition that repay closer reading with the same kind of realism and complexity found in the poems from the periodicals. The result is a multivocal poet of broad range and considerable power who bridges the apparent gap between the poetry of the high romantics and that of the high modernists. Bennett notes the poetry’s “stylistic anticipations of modernism” (xix), and indeed the voice in Piatt’s poems often sounds like T. S. Eliot’s (or more likely, T. S. Eliot often sounds like a Victorian American).

With the publication of this collection, Sarah Piatt unambiguously jumps to the front-rank of nineteenth-century American poets. Only Walt Whitman and Dickinson clearly outstrip her in power and originality. Yet Piatt’s poetry is quite different from that of other American “masters.” Her mature work begins with a firm rejection of both escapist romanticism and high sentimentality in favor of a polyvocal, premodern aesthetic that confronts loss and isolation directly.

Like Emily Dickinson, Piatt often uses a childlike voice to clothe troublesome insights and questions in innocence. But where Dickinson’s speaker is childlike, Piatt’s speakers are more often staid middle-class women interrogated by children. The best example of this dynamic is the title poem of the book (already the most frequently anthologized of Piatt’s poems), in which a mother and child discuss a Harper’s illustration of a female Parisian Communard about to be executed (she is
the palace-burner). The child’s easy enthusiasm for the palace-burner causes the mother to question her own sense of self:

You would have burned the palace? Just because
You did not live in it yourself! Oh! why?
Have I not taught you to respect the laws?
You would have burned the palace. Would not I?
Would I? Go to your play. Would I, indeed?
I? Does the boy not know my soul to be
Languid and worldly, with a dainty need
For light and music? Yet he questions me.
Can he have seen my soul more near than I?

(39–40)

In other poems, however, such as the wickedly funny “Mock Diamonds” (1872), women speak with clear-eyed realism, in contrast to the romantic fantasies of men. In “Mock Diamonds,” a woman tours a seaside resort after the war with her new husband, pointing out antebellum male acquaintances to him, much to his discomfort: “The handsome man there with the scar?— / (Who bow’d to me? Yes, slightly)—” (29). The husband is distressed to find out that his idealized wife has a history, but she brushes off his fears, gently scolding: “Leave your sweet jealousy unsaid: / Your bright child’s fading mother / And that guerilla from—the dead? / Are nothing to each other” (30). The delight and humor in poems like this one come from the contrast between the female speaker’s complete comfort with reality and the male listener’s adherence to romanticism and decorum (though, even here, there is an undertone of sorrow; the speaker, after all, is “fading”).

Like other well-known women poets of the time, especially Phoebe Cary and Frances Osgood, Piatt continually toys with the reader; we are never quite sure whether she is being blithe or scathingly ironic. And as the husband in “Mock Diamonds” must have felt for the rest of his married life, we are always a little nervous that we have just missed something. The capacity for sharp but subtle irony is an important resource for a poet who produces mainly genteel poetry. It forces us to read all her work more closely, an effort that goes to the heart of the major critical issue that Bennett raises in her introduction. Claiming that Piatt’s poetry “can never be recuperated as part of [the] formalist ‘high art’ tradition” that includes Whitman, Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and such, Bennett argues, “To read Sarah Piatt as she should be read will mean, therefore, not only grasping her irony. It will also mean becoming considerably more open in what we look for and value in poetry itself. It will mean, that is, learning to read for values beside the word” (li).

Piatt’s poetry may not exhibit the verbal freshness of Whitman and Dickinson, but I think Bennett sells Piatt short when she claims that “her strongest poetry is too rooted in her own ground, her own time, her own set of desperate and particular concerns: child death, Civil War, bad-faith marriages and bad-faith politics, romanticism gone sour, poetry and art that gild over the truth or exploit it for their own ends, children who lose their innocence before they even know they have it in a society that from its origins was saturated in violence and blood” (li). Presumably, by “too rooted” Bennett means that it cannot be read out of context, in the way that,
say, Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death—” has been read without the context of mid-nineteenth-century Calvinist New England attitudes toward courtship, gender, and death. This may be true. Piatt’s poetry is not hauntingly evocative like Dickinson’s, or exuberantly suggestive like Whitman’s. But if Piatt does not give us a poetry of verbal fireworks, she does give us a poetry of psychological and social insight that does not merely present viewpoints, but rather, as Kenneth Burke says of poetry, dances an attitude. In Piatt’s poetry, we see the mind talking through situations, deciding how it will react to the world. Bennett is right that Piatt’s poetry is difficult, and Bennett’s notes help make the poetry more accessible. This difficulty, however, is not because Piatt’s poetry model is based in “particular concerns” such as death, war, love, politics, and art, but because she is a complex poet writing about the complex world in which she lives.

Piatt’s strongest work is marked by both an unflinching realism and a very deep emotional involvement in the world. This is best seen in the poems about her own dead children, in which, as Bennett says, “she sends up howls of pain . . . not to be matched again in women’s poetry until Sylvia Plath” (xlvi). In “Her Blindness in Grief,” published in 1873, three months after her newborn baby died (this loss was the first of three such losses), the grieving mother remains “blind” to the consoling clichés offered to mothers in such circumstances. Like Emerson, who says of the death of his son Waldo, “The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is,” Piatt refuses to make meaning out of her child’s death:

The grief is bitter. Let me be.
He lies beneath that lonesome tree.
I’ve heard the fierce rain beating there.
Night covers it with cold moonshine.
Despair can only be despair.
God has his will. I have not mine.

(51)

The lines—the quick, sharp diction; the short sentences; the directness—are to my mind some of the most authentically human lines of nineteenth-century American poetry. Unlike the unsentimental romantics—such as Melville or Henry David Thoreau—Piatt confronts human grief and experience directly, without intellectual mediation. And unlike sentimental writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, in whose writing no child is anything but stunningly beautiful, Piatt does not try to heighten the pathos by talking about the child’s beauty. Further, she turns sentimental clichés on their head. The dead child’s hands are not “white as snow”; they are “still as snows” (51).

As anyone familiar with her scholarship would expect, Bennett has done a superb job reintroducing Piatt in this volume. It opens with a thorough introduction to the author’s life and poetics, which Bennett calls dramatic realism. And the poems themselves are rendered more accessible by ample footnotes containing both textual variants and background information. This text will serve as an excellent foundation for scholarship on Sarah Piatt, of which there should be a great deal in the future.

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