

Disputably a Woman

Recovering Incoherence in Sarah Piatt's Poetry

By Ben Bagocius. Originally published in *Neo-Americanist*, Vol. 5 no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010) issue.

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Risky Recovery

Propelled by Cheryl Walker's groundbreaking anthology *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (1992), many Americanists have become invested in recovering and making accessible "lost" poetic voices of the nineteenth-century, most of which belong to women. Tired of the masculinist New Critical tradition which appears to have wiped out the "sentimentalist" work of nineteenth-century writers in favor of a more "complex" aesthetics that values uniqueness rather than convention, these Americanists have begun to reevaluate the voices of women poets silenced by that tradition. Poets such as Lydia Sigourney, Emma Lazarus, and Frances Watkins Harper have thus garnered relatively new academic interest, as have the "cultural and material conditions" of women's writing in the nineteenth-century U.S. ¹

This essay centers on Paula Bernat Bennett's recovery of a single poet, Sarah Piatt, in Bennett's *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poems of Sarah Piatt* (2001). Piatt, a writer widely published throughout the late nineteenth-century, was, like most of her female poet contemporaries, "treated with almost total neglect" throughout much of the twentieth-century. ² Yet thanks in large part to Bennett's recovery efforts, Americanists have re-investigated Piatt's work, so much so that her poetry was included in both the *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies of American literature in 2002 and 2003. ³ As the inclusion of Piatt in the *Norton* and the *Heath* demonstrates, "recovery scholars" (as we might call them), if they are successful, remove a poet from a chorus of her contemporaries' voices and place her in a position of isolation and autonomy: standing alone in her newly certified uniqueness, she now looms above and beyond that of most of her writing peers, in the company of other "canonical" writers whose status has long been assured. In this essay, I hope in part to suggest that such glorification of a single poet seems oddly close to what many "recoverers" consider a New Critical agenda of lionizing intellectual complexity, opacity, and autonomy, the same agenda many "recoverers" claim to contest.



Bennett's recovery of Piatt's work is extremely important, for it was intended to contribute to a hope Cheryl Walker has expressed about recovery work, namely that it make "a much larger selection of poets and poems . . . available for study."⁴ Yet Bennett's recovery methodology seems to fence Piatt within a proto-modern affiliation as if meanings available within Piatt's poems, and within modernism itself, are bounded by definite generic and discursive elements. Bennett aims to position Piatt as "one of us," so to speak, as, "after Emily Dickinson, the nineteenth-century American woman poet most appealing to readers today" due to her poetic activism, hence deserving "our" attention as "readers today."⁵ But are writers worthy of attention just because they are presumably like "us"? Do those who are not like "us" deserve obscurity? And who is the "us" who seems to share the same literary standards and readings that Bennett takes for granted in her recovery?

This essay joins the lively debates about the methodological politics of literary "recovery" that began to pick up steam in 1999, in large part sparked by Mary Poovey's keynote address at the British Women Writers Association annual conference. The conference intended to promote recovery scholarship by emphasizing "women's writing that has been ignored, overlooked, or excluded from the canon."⁶ In her address, Poovey suggests that much "ignored" writing is ignored for a reason: it cannot live up to the academic standards of "literary value," and therefore needs "critical analysis" to "make certain texts seem canon-worthy or as integral parts of literary history."⁷ Poovey proposes that many "recovery" scholars force themselves to find "literary value" in a forgotten text. A critic's ability to present

a text as worthy of recovery and study demands a feat of critical ingenuity and creativity, a sort of intellectual gymnastics which become more valuable and interesting than the text itself. What counts as the “literary,” then, in Poovey’s eyes, becomes displaced and dispersed into the ingenuity and creativity of literary criticism rather than resides as manifest in the “recovered” text itself. Poovey therefore asks: if criticism becomes more “literary” than putative literature, how can we convince students – and the larger public – that literature *in itself* is worth their time, energy, devotion, and money? ⁸ In this light, Poovey calls for scholars to “focus on developing a shared rationale for literary work . . . that explains what we [literary scholars] do and why it matters.” ⁹ Rather than making the canon more inclusive, Poovey suggests literary scholars clarify to themselves why the books they do teach are worth teaching and passing on to further generations of readers.

For Poovey, to begin welcoming texts into the literary canon that do not lend themselves to academics’ “critical tools” of assessing literariness is to “jeopardize the foundational claims of our entire discipline,” claims that rest on literature as a site of complexity and exclusivity.¹⁰ Scholars like Margaret Homans and Jill Campbell, on the other hand, welcome this jeopardizing. For them, jeopardizing the discipline is one of the key features of literary studies as a discipline, not an anomaly of it. In Homans’s and Campbell’s accounts, works that do not precisely “yield to the critical tools critics develop” ¹¹ serve as opportunities to adjust and nuance those tools: recovering and thinking about new works changes rather than eradicates what counts as “literary value.” “Literary value” for Campbell encompasses “adhering” to and cultivating a “mode of interest or experience,” to seek “the aesthetic, emotional, and cognitive richness” that “human beings, women among them, have made our sought . . . under circumstances remarkably diverse.” ¹² Rather than necessarily seeking New Critical intellectual complexity in texts, Campbell proposes that scholars remain open to alternative ways to approach and connect with a text, such as reading it to illuminate a historical context or understanding it as participating in an emerging periodical culture. Moreover, as Homans points out, because “recovered” works motivate critics to seek new interpretive tools with which to think about them, these new tools become useful in reassessing and reconceptualizing canonical works. Important, too, for Homans, is that literary studies have seldom had a consistently exclusive canon *to rupture*: “The syllabi of university and college courses have changed over the centuries: there is no single, fixed canon.” ¹³ In other words, “recovery” scholars are not disrupting the literary canon by introducing forgotten authors into it as much as they are participating in the dynamic nature of canonicity itself.

In light of the debate among Poovey, Homans, and Campbell, Bennett’s recovery of Piatt is particularly illuminating as a case study. While Bennett seems aligned with Homans and Campbell in her intent to keep the gates of literary canonicity wide open, Bennett simultaneously seems aligned with Poovey in her celebration of Piatt as a poet who deserves to enter the gates only due to her New Critical “literariness,” her intellectual complexity and stylistic modernism. Bennett’s “recovery” method,

although seemingly ambiguous, ultimately seems to open the canonical gates only to shut them after admitting Piatt. Despite Bennett's opposition to New Critical aesthetics, her "recovery" method ensures that New Critical "literariness" remains secure. Celebrated and shut in as a proto-feminist and modernist, Piatt's other potential messages remain shut out. My article seeks to examine Bennett's immensely important and influential work as a recovery project with good intentions that nevertheless ends up re-aligning a "lost" poet with a monolithic discourse of identity and affiliation from which Bennett, as a "recovery scholar," claims to have liberated her. By illuminating the paradoxes of such recovery projects, I hope to suggest that a "lost" poet's identities, as well as the generic affiliations connected with that poet, should not be taken for granted but should be honored, to paraphrase Judith Butler in another context on gender, as "not fully secured in advance." [14](#) And I would add, as neither fully secured along the way nor afterwards. The gate, even when locked, is low enough to jump over.

Generic and Identificatory Leakage

The cover illustration of Bennett's *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* shows a female French activist, a *Petroleuse*, cornered by gun-wielding, uniformed, male members of the loyalist Versaillais army. Entitled "The End of the Commune—Execution of a *Petroleuse*," this illustration appeared in the July 1871 edition of *Harper's Weekly*, a popular nineteenth-century periodical. [15](#) A few months before, members of the socialist Paris Commune, such as the depicted *Petroleuse*, had retaliated against the Versaillais government's institutionalized class oppression by burning government buildings throughout Paris. The illustration depicts *Petroleuse*'s final moments before government officials kill her for her activism. By titling her selection of Piatt's poems *Palace-Burner*, Bennett aligns her author with the politically rebellious *Petroleuse*. Rather than burning actual palaces, Piatt has burned them metaphorically, Bennett would like us to think: as a heroic rebel against patriarchy, Piatt was a very "political poet" who "pushed the limits of Victorian language and the Victorian female persona as hard as she could," fighting the genteel literary establishment. [16](#) The fact that Piatt has emerged as "the most appealing" female American poet after Emily Dickinson is proof of her eventual triumph over oppressive patriarchal culture, if not in her lifetime, then in ours. [17](#) Culture eventually catches up to Piatt's visionary work as twenty-first century Americanists begin to see how Piatt's poetry resists genteel oppression, "broadening the range of available emotions for all women poets." [18](#)

Bennett showcases *Petroleuse* and Piatt as heroes: they sacrifice their bodies, whether physical or figurative, for their visionary ideals. [19](#) The establishment is out to get these rebels, whether by killing them (in the *Petroleuse*'s case) or by writing "downright hostile" reviews of their work (in Piatt's case). [20](#) We are to feel pity for their wounded bodies: the *Petroleuse*'s body was shot as Piatt's corpus was "roasted" by reviewers for the "range and complexity of its thematic concerns and for its

stylistic anticipations of modernism.” ²¹ Piatt was “dismissed after her death” as a “minor poet,” relegated to the dustbins of the unread. ²² Such abuse of the Petroleuse’s and Piatt’s literal and figurative bodies underscore their qualifications as heroes: their suffering makes them worthy of twenty-first century readers’ glorification. Mary Loeffelholz states that many scholars have come to identify sentimentalism in literature as that which conjures “identification with others by means of sympathy and primal feelings, especially feelings of suffering and loss”; we are impelled to “read” those feelings, in particular, through the suffering body of the “wounded woman.” ²³ Bennett uses these common tropes of sentimentality to underscore the urgency of her project of recovering the unsung “wounded woman,” Piatt.

Ironically however, Bennett, in her introduction to *Palace-Burner*, painstakingly attempts to distance Piatt from gentility and sentimentality. By aligning Piatt with sentimental figures such as wounded women in order to celebrate Piatt as a non-sentimental writer, Bennett inadvertently highlights complexities within sentimentality that many scholars, seeing it as “conventional” and “literarily naive,” overlook. ²⁴ The volume’s cover illustration of the Petroleuse serves as an illuminating example for how sentimentality itself is pervaded by paradoxes. On one hand, the cover illustration suggests that sentimentality can be used to empower the status of women, to depict Piatt and the Petroleuse as fearless, political heroes for women’s rights. On the other hand, the women receive acclaim as fearless heroes through the suffering to which they are *subjected*. The women experience triumph only through their submission to a sentimental convention that requires that they suffer. According to putative sentimental discourse, it seems, women must submit in order to achieve recognition, a devil’s pact that might sound unacceptable to many twenty-first century ears. And yet, as Shira Wolosky maintains, much of nineteenth-century women’s poetry, because it is neither fully sentimental nor “simply oppositional,” offers a nuanced conception of social change and transformation: “Conservative motives and concessions ultimately unleashed progressive outcomes, contrary to their intention, in a transformative process that could not be controlled. Domesticity opened a door out of the house.” ²⁵ Elements of sentimentality can be transgressive in ways that often remain unconscious to its readers *and* writers. In this sense Piatt’s and the Petroleuse’s suffering seems to triumph against sentimental convention as much as it marks them as bound boundedness to and within that convention.

That said, Bennett too, in her introduction to her anthology *Nineteenth-Century American Woman Poets* (1998), describes sentimentality as trickier and more complex than many scholars conceive of it: “How [sentimentality and gentility] play out in any particular text or writer’s oeuvre can be exceedingly complicated, even treacherous, to sort out.” ²⁶ This might serve as a response to scholars like Wolosky who find the concept of “sentimentality” limiting and inadequate to describe the diverse array of discursive elements at play in nineteenth-century women’s poetry. Wolosky contends that “establishing sentimentality as the major mode of women’s

poetry risks reducing its variety and multifocal energies, which go beyond, although they include, the sentimental.” [27](#) Bennett continues to insist that the terms “sentimental” or “genteel” (she conflates the two in her anthology) are by their very nature “multifocal.” [28](#) For Bennett, labeling poems “sentimental” or “genteel” does not reduce their complexities; rather, it encourages scholars to acknowledge sentimentality as a complex form in which writers employ suffering and sympathy in order to create, communicate, and transform cultural knowledge and power. As the cover illustration of *Palace-Burner* shows, sentimentality is, to echo Bennett, “neither univocal nor transparent. Like any other complex set of artistic encodings of individual and social experience, it needs to be read with care and with due attention to slippage and to ironic reversals.” [29](#)

At this point, then, it sounds as if Bennett’s stance on sentimentality is divided: in the introduction to her anthology, she presents sentimentality as “neither univocal nor transparent”; that is, as complex and opaque. In her recovery of Piatt, however, Bennett condemns sentimentality as mind-numbingly transparent and simplistic. Those of Piatt’s poems that Bennett views as highly genteel or sentimental have been banished from *Palace-Burner*: “Popular though her genteel poems were, I have, accordingly, limited their number here.” [30](#) Ultimately Bennett seems to have decided – not surprisingly, given the overwhelmingly damning literature on the subject – that despite its “artistic complexities,” sentimentality is something that should be overcome. Thus, in the introduction to her anthology, Bennett celebrates Elizabeth Oakes Smith as abandoning sentimental “conventional[ity]” and “reject[ing] the passive, sentimentalized gender values” that her work, such as “The Sinless Child,” “celebrates” in favor of writing “pot-boiling, reformist fiction.” [31](#) Oakes Smith shows, in alignment with Wolosky’s contention regarding the workings of “sentimentality,” that sentimentality “was not the only stylistic or affective option available to women poets during the century, nor did the basic premises underlying sentimentality’s appeals to emotion . . . go uncontested.” [32](#) In a similar vein, Bennett lauds Piatt’s poem “His Mother’s Way” as “ironic and bitter” rather than “sentimental.” [33](#)

But positioning irony and sentimentality as mutually exclusive risks overlooking places where their discourses overlap and thereby transform the supposed coherency and containment of both. For instance, Bennett dismisses Piatt’s poem “The Witch in the Glass” (1880) as one of her “triumphs of genteel art” and critiques Piatt, in this instance, for poetically catering to “what her period wanted.” [34](#) Besides the fact that what “her period wanted” was not univocal but, rather, as Matthew Giordano states, “changing too quickly and . . . expanding too widely to make large generalizations about the state of periodical poetry,” the poem is hardly purely genteel in the way Bennett understands gentility. [35](#) I read the poem as extremely ironic, transgressing realms of sexuality, knowledge, and power:

My mother says I must not pass

Too near that glass;

She is afraid that I will see
 A little witch that looks like me,
 With a red, red mouth, to whisper low
 The very thing I should not know! [36](#)

The speaker seems to suggest that she *knows* why her mother “says I must not pass/ Too near that glass.” It is not clear that the mother herself has revealed her reasons for the prohibition. The speaker, not the mother, provides us with the reason for her mother’s prohibition (“She is afraid that I will see . . .”). Apparently, then, the speaker already knows “[t]he very thing I should not know!”, and seems to delight in this transgressive knowledge, indulging in the eroticism of the “red, red mouth” that tantalizingly “whisper[s] low.”

Putting Bennett’s introductions from both *Palace-Burner* and her anthology together, it seems that sentimentality is of value only when it portrays complexity. Ultimately, then, complexity is what is valuable, not sentimentality. When sentimentality is not partnered with complexity, Bennett portrays the two as antagonistic. Piatt has been forgotten by New Critics, the “saddest” thing about which, for Bennett, is that “insofar as she has been remembered at all, it has been as—what else?—a genteel poet.” [37](#) Bennett, whose argument for recovering Piatt relies upon the complexities of sentimental strategies, condemns the label of “genteel poet” as one of the worst fates imaginable for a pre-modernist poet like Piatt, who desires not only to “undermine” the strictures of “sentimentalism,” but also “to stand alone” and take delight in her proto-modernist aesthetics of “complex subjectivity and startling originality of perception.” [38](#)

In other words, Bennett’s recovery methodology binds Piatt to a homogenized discourse of both sentimentality *and* modernity, even as she critiques both. Consequently, Bennett participates in the essentializing discourse that characterizes the emergence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism. According to Scott Herring, “discursive inventions . . . were often designed to comprehend and codify social contact across borders segregating social classes, including classes based on ethnicity, race, capital, gender deviance, and, in due time, sexual identity.” [39](#) Modernist discourse “takes a ‘concretely indefinable’ mystery out of the streets and puts it into a concretely definable form in the reader’s hand.” [40](#) By inventing a name for literary phenomena, such as “sentimental” or “modern,” many scholars *create* essence under the guise of recognizing or acknowledging it, thereby ignoring what Herring calls in conversation “leakage,” the blurring between and among social and discursive interactions and locations. What is created as an isolatable location is in fact a porous inter- and intradependency of incoherent and contradictory discourses.

Discourses surrounding sentimentality and modernism rarely coalesce into simple, coherent propositions that don't contradict each other. Bennett claims that sentimentality is multifocal while her recovery methodology largely presents sentimentality as monolithic. She also seems to suggest that sentimentality is useful only when it's complex, while at the same time portraying complexity as a sign of modernism rather than of sentimentality. Modernism supposedly embraces originality, but as Herring shows us, originality is often edged out by modernism's manufactured discursive regimes. By attempting to locate Piatt's work as "standing alone," by attempting to remove Piatt's work from "leaking" into sentimentality and gentility, by emphasizing Piatt's "complex subjectivity and depth of perception," Bennett paradoxically positions Piatt's work as a New Critical dream-come-true, which is precisely the ideology from which she claims to save Piatt.

If a recovery of Piatt inadvertently contradicts the recovery project's own New Critical aesthetics, then how can we be so sure that Piatt's writing is so identifiable and consistent as to be either "genteel" or "premodernist"? The volatility of sentimental and modernist discourses seems to point to the idea that there is no perfectly coherent critical discourse with which to assess such writers. Instead, academic discourse, like the writing it seeks to position, seems to be characterized by leakage. Consequently, in the second part of this essay, I propose approaching Piatt's work through a methodology of discursive disunity, through leakage.

Challenging the idea of coherent categories and identification even further, Piatt's poetic speakers may themselves be alienated from their voices, as Bennett seems to be from hers (some Foucauldian scholars might contend that *any* speaker cannot help but be alienated from "voice," since subjects, rather than the creators of discourse, are produced *through* and *by* discourse that precedes and exceeds them). Piatt's work seems largely invested in the idea of incoherent, unstable categories and identities. I read Piatt as less interested in outright genre rebellion, identity, and women's rights, for instance, and as more interested in "keep[ing] you in the dark," to echo an observation made by Herring in a different context, on twentieth-century homosexual "unknowing."⁴¹ At one point, Bennett herself suggests that Piatt's poetry barely offers her readers a "handle" into its worlds.⁴² Indeed, Piatt may be resisting her readers' obsession with "grasping" anything.

Since, for Bennett, what Piatt writes is tantamount to Piatt's identity as "indisputably a woman," what is at stake in Bennett's project, then, is not only characteristics of genre, but notions of "woman's" identity itself.⁴³ Would Piatt still be "indisputably a woman" if she had never written proto-modernist poetry? Would Piatt be "indisputably a woman" if she had written poetry that is not locatable into distinct genres, but that suggests that such generic distinctions themselves are incoherent, messy, leaky? Would Piatt's work be worth recovering if it were not written by the proto-modernist woman Bennett wants Piatt to be for the sake of twenty-first century readers?

We might keep in mind that the very identity of “woman” is disputable, as Bennett’s cover illustration shows. A woman can be, for instance, hero and victim simultaneously. And how each person understands “woman,” “hero,” and “victim” will be very different, as Bennett also appears to admit in her anthology’s introduction. Indeed, scholars such as Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and Hortense Spillers have shown that the very categories of “woman” (let alone of “sentimental” and “modernist”) *are and always have been* disputable and in no way signify the same thing to all people transhistorically and/or transculturally, as well as intrahistorically and intraculturally. Even if Piatt identified herself as a “modern woman,” her conceptions of these terms may not have been identical to Bennett’s conception of “modern,” may not have been identical to those of many her own contemporaries, and may not have been consistent or identical to herself. [44](#) I question any recovery approach that assumes that Piatt’s (or any other female nineteenth-century poet’s) conceptions of “woman” and (more broadly) of identity were even coherent to *her*.

I approach, then, Piatt’s poetry as if her work, even each poem, is an anthology of voices rather than a cohesive voice, exhibiting a diverse range of positions, identities, and dis-identities rather than showcasing what Bennett seems to suggest is an identifiably “premodernist” pose. Wolosky’s engine for her anthology is similar to my engine for studying Piatt’s work: “What marks this women’s writing . . . is a complex multiplicity of identities. The women define themselves along a number of planes: through gender; through their vocation as poet; through their national identity as American; and through their religious background. Each of these categories is undergoing enormous change, in themselves and in relation to each other.” [45](#) But whereas Wolosky sees these women as “defin[ing] themselves,” I’d like to explore how Piatt’s work may be resisting any sort of definition, identification, or knowledge of the self. It might appear, then, that I’m about to resurrect Piatt as a postmodernist. Yet to refer to Piatt as a postmodernist would mean, once again, aligning her work with discursive coherence, attempting discursively to tame it, providing a “handle” that her work resists.

Given how Bennett’s writing itself is an example of the incoherence of the project of identifying and knowing, I advocate a recovery methodology that approaches writers’ work in a way that makes space for dis-identifying from the notion of identity itself. I, in other words, am writing “against this mode of imagining a women’s history as a ‘perfect’ recovery,” to echo Loeffelholz. [46](#) An insistence that there is a cognizable and knowable “Piatt” imposes what she *must* be for an idealized notion of readers today over the possibilities of what she *may have been*. I propose, reading Piatt’s work as giving voice to *disputable* women. What if Piatt’s poetic speakers often were to write themselves *out of* the category of “woman” even as Piatt may, as Bennett suggests, be employing what Piatt herself characterizes as “women’s words” to do so? [47](#) Even as there are signals in Piatt’s work that her poems resist genteel patriarchy by using “women’s words” to voice women’s suffering and oppression, the poems as a

whole *also* signify what looks like discomfort with the concept of any coherent identity, even that of “woman” itself.

My approach to the project of recovery, like Bennett’s, comes with its own presumptions, namely, that Piatt may not be as certain about an identifiable, emancipatory project as Bennett imagines her to be. After all, Bennett believes that each of Piatt’s poems has a “point” that one can “get” if one just spends enough time on it: it’s only a matter of time “before the full dimensions of [Piatt’s] literary achievement and its significance can be assessed.” [48](#) I approach Piatt much like Loeffelholz suggests in a different context, by asking the following questions: “How ‘other’ is my female precursor’s power? How ‘other’ was her power to her? If I connect myself with her, do I also connect myself to her possibly alienated or oppressed sense of the sources of her own power?” [49](#) We might keep in mind that Piatt’s writing, just like Bennett’s, may be working in ways that are alien to how she *thinks* it is working. Consequently, as hopeful as Bennett is that someday “the full dimensions of [Piatt’s] literary achievement and its significance can be assessed,” Loeffelholz seems to suggest that such a hope is misguided.

Instead, Loeffelholz proposes, scholars might look to moments of disconnection, of aesthetic and identificatory otherness, as generative rather than disappointing. Because “separation is sometimes sought after, for a variety of reasons,” a recoverer can still “tr[y] to protect and honor [the writer’s] strangeness” by offering “respect for [her] otherness.” [50](#) A recoverer’s intent to connect with a poet might overlook moments where significant misconnections occur, where uncertainty and hesitation to connect, rather than uninterrupted connection, reveal themselves. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan proposes, “perhaps the best possibility for ‘understanding’ racial, sexual, and ethnic difference lies in the *active* acceptance of the inevitability of misunderstanding” one another. [51](#) To avoid historical narcissism in recovery projects, and the notion that all ages strive to live in, and as our present ones, it might be helpful to pursue recovery methodologies that revel in and encourage the “hope and anxiety” of questions instead of hunting for answers to confirm what we already think we know. [52](#)

Reading “The Palace-Burner”

Piatt’s poem “The Palace-Burner” (1872) might provide us with a helpful example for what I am trying to propose is problematic about “understanding” and “knowing” a poet. Whereas Bennett reads “The Palace-Burner” as “distill[ing] the essence of what Piatt as a poet is all about,” I’d like to suggest that this poem resists the idea of essence altogether. [53](#) Matthew Giordano has pointed out that many critics, including Bennett, have positioned “The Palace-Burner” as a mediation between sentimentalism and modernism. [54](#) According to Giordano, “The Palace-Burner” exhibits aspects of sentimentality and modernism, fusing them together to cater to the disparate tastes of periodical readers in the nineteenth-century. Yet Giordano

assesses Piatt's work by framing it within binaries, a method that I would resist. Her poems, to Giordano, are "profoundly difficult and clearly accessible, formally experimental and utterly conventional." [55](#) Reading "The Palace-Burner" as a mediation serves to keep sentimentality and modernism at opposite ends of an essentializing, discursive spectrum rather than acknowledging their leakage, entanglement, and incoherence. Despite his vision of discourse as demarcated, however, Giordano's study of Piatt is nonetheless incredibly helpful in beginning to theorize leakage at play in Piatt's work: "Piatt's poems are multifunctional, transgressing divisions between different generic categories and between conventionality and originality, accessibility and erudition, and popularity and elitism." [56](#)

At first glance, "The Palace-Burner" presents a mother and son looking through a magazine together and finding themselves drawn to an illustration that could very well be "The End of the Commune—Execution of a Petroleuse." Already by the first line, the speaker distances herself both in terms of identity and geography from association with the Petroleuse, by stating, "She has been burning palaces." [57](#) Not only does the speaker make reference to the Petroleuse only as "she," an unnamed, vague other, but the speaker also suggests that the Petroleuse's violent, political, and strangely exotic act of "burning palaces" appears worlds away from the speaker's putatively mundane activity of perusing a magazine safe at home with her child. Both Giordano and Bennett read "The Palace-Burner" as Piatt's admonishment to apolitical, domesticated women, thereby buying into the notion of a coherent, locatable sentimental tradition against which Piatt was fighting. Bennett emphasizes that the speaker "explores her own complicity and, by inference, that of other women, whose 'dainty need for light and music' has left their souls too 'languid and worldly' to risk the righting of a wrong. Surrounded by material comforts, women like the speaker are also part of the problem, infecting the domestic interior, even the nursery, with their passive acquiescence in evil." [58](#) Giordano finds Bennett's reading of the poem as a critique of bourgeois, domestic women's complicity in "evil" convincing, and writes that "The Palace-Burner" "questions the fundamental tenets of domestic ideology and the political apathy of the stereotypical domestic woman." [59](#)

Even as Giordano and Bennett provide promising paths into the poem, their belief that the speaker "infect[s] the domestic interior" to acquiesce in "evil" seems to be a sensationalized reading that parallels the putative sensationalizing of sentimentalism. Bennett's and Giordano's arguments make perfect sense if we believe that Piatt's writing exhibits "fundamental tenets" and essences, such as "evil," "domesticity," and "sentimentality." I can see how Bennett and Giordano *might* read the speaker as to *some* extent "infecting the domestic interior": by choosing to interact with her child over a magazine, the speaker is not using that time to sacrifice her life for human rights, "to risk the righting of a wrong," to echo Bennett, as a political martyr. But there's another word for this "infection": some might call it parenting. The speaker is, after all, interacting with a child who obviously looks up to

her for guidance and acknowledgement. Since most experts on child development suggest that stable support and love from an adult is one of the key factors of a child's emotional and physical development, the word "evil" to characterize this scene seems imprecise, if not also melodramatic.

I would argue, too, that this scene between a mother and her son looking at a picture in a magazine is hardly just domestic; it is an international one, too. The speaker herself takes pride in her "worldliness." The speaker's and child's interaction, in this instance, is informed by events that take place in France. It could, then, be proposed that print culture, not the speaker, "infect" this scene. After all, it is print culture, "A Picture in a Magazine," as Piatt tells us in her subtitle, that first brings violence not only into the poem, but into the home. And this violence to the home comes in the form of a woman, the *Petroleuse*, enacting it: "She has been burning palaces." [60](#) Consequently, whereas Bennett reads the speaker's depiction of the *Petroleuse* as an ideal woman who heroically enacts the "righting of a wrong," I read the speaker's depiction of the *Petroleuse* as proposing an ambivalence about connecting with and separating from the identity of "woman," an identity which may bring violence into an otherwise peaceful home.

In fact, "The Palace-Burner"'s second line also emphasizes disassociation and difference. Piatt underscores the different meanings at play in the illustration of the burning palace: to the young child, the "sparks look pretty in the wind," while to the adult speaker, the sparks connote beauty as well, but also "something more," something that eludes expression, something that the speaker herself does not have access to formulating or knowing: she can only "guess." [61](#) The speaker moves from an inability to formulate her thoughts to a recognition of her own inability to identify as "woman." The *Petroleuse* compels the speaker to distance herself from, by disidentifying with, the identity of "woman," calling herself instead a "coward" while the ones burning the palace are "women." [62](#) Even as she is parenting, interacting with her child, the supposedly highest marker of what some might consider genteel womanhood, the speaker considers herself not woman, but ungendered "coward."

The speaker's unpleasant identification with "coward," however, seems to impel her to *consider* identifying with the martyrdom and "womanhood" of the *Petroleuse*. Would violent transgression for a political cause transform the speaker's status from "coward" to "wom[a]n brave as [the *Petroleuse*]?" [63](#) Yet the speaker's reveries about possible connection with the *Petroleuse* immediately become problematic. After her son states that he would have burned palaces, and teases that his mother would have, too, the speaker reconsiders the laudability of violence. Once violence is imagined within herself and her family, she challenges her son: "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?" [64](#) When palace burning hits close to home, the speaker's disgust for violence begins to outweigh the glory of possibly identifying with the "brave" *Petroleuse*.

The unpleasant reaction to her son's provocation stems not only from her repulsion of violence. Part of the speaker's discomfort emerges from her consequent questioning of the entire notion of herself as a coherent figure, repeating "I?" over and over again, suggesting a frantic compulsion to *create* an "I" rather than ontologically to *be* one: "You would have burned the palace. Would not I?// Would I? Go to your play. Would I, indeed?/ I?" [65](#) "I" becomes a stutter, a jarring tick carried across the page, suggesting selfhood characterized more by mobilities of starts and stops, interruptions, and projections rather than by a static unity and consistency. In other words, the image of the Petroleuse begins to prompt the speaker to *disidentify* with a notion of selfhood, to identify herself as *not* knowing herself. She wonders to what extent one must be outside oneself, *displaced*, in order to have access to a self, thereby once again emphasizing mobility and separation of self and identity. After all, the speaker wonders whether an onlooker, her son, has more access to her mobile selves than she does: "Can [the child] have seen my soul more near than I?" [66](#)

The speculation that parts of one's self remain outside oneself, inaccessible and unknowable, prompts the speaker to reevaluate the coherence of the Petroleuse. Because the speaker now questions her own self-coherence, she wonders whether the coherence she assumed characterizes the Petroleuse is itself a projection. Can the Petroleuse be labeled a brave woman if she herself was alienated from her own splintered self, if the Petroleuse herself did not identify as a brave woman? The speaker imagines the Petroleuse as disconnected from her suffering in a contradictory moment of "unappealing, beautiful despair." [67](#) The Petroleuse's mouth which has "lips to kiss away a baby's cry" also contains poison of which the speaker wonders if the Petroleuse is aware, and asks whether the Petroleuse has a "charm so calm it could breathe/ In damp, low places till some frightened hour;/ Then start, like a fair, subtle snake, and wreath/ A stinging poison with a shadowy power?" [68](#) Is the Petroleuse aware of the remedial and destructive, the consoling and the poisonous untapped reserves of the self?

To the speaker, it doesn't matter whether or not the Petroleuse considers herself a coherent "woman" or not. What matters is that the speaker comes to *allow* the Petroleuse the space of *possibly* embodying incoherence and inconsistency of "self." What matters, too, is that the speaker identifies with the Petroleuse's possible "unknowing [of] her suffering: What would it mean to identify with the suffering of someone so thoroughly alienated from her own pain?" [69](#) The Petroleuse may in fact be so invested in her dying for a cause that she becomes detached from her suffering. Perhaps she does not know that she suffers. Consequently, if the speaker were to align herself with the Petroleuse, she could be aligning herself with the Petroleuse's own alienation from herself.

Whereas Bennett ultimately reads "The Palace-Burner" as the speaker's lamentation that she is less "woman" than the Petroleuse, I read this poem as saturated with the speaker's anxiety about the impossibility of understanding what "woman" means. By the end of the poem, the speaker perceives the Petroleuse as no longer a woman, but something more complicated and less familiar: a "fierce creature" characterizing

contradictions, “bright with bitterness, and so serene.” ⁷⁰ The speaker does indeed seem to lament that the Petroleuse is a “being finer than my soul,” but just precisely what this “being” entails remains nebulous. ⁷¹ Consequently, the speaker hesitates to align herself with the Petroleuse not only because she sees the Petroleuse as “finer” than her, but also because the speaker is not sure that “finer” means better. If the speaker were to imagine a connection with the Petroleuse, the speaker would possibly be connecting not to the Petroleuse, but to the Petroleuse’s “possibly alienated or oppressed sense of the sources of her own power.” ⁷² But by disconnecting from the Petroleuse, by considering that the Petroleuse may be a “being finer than my soul,” the speaker demeans herself. Neither option, connection nor disconnection, is completely suitable to her. By the end of the poem, the speaker is confused and uncertain not only about how to identify herself, but whether or not she even should.

Generative Misunderstanding

As scholars, we are often impelled to “know” and to “understand,” and to deliver this knowledge and understanding in normative narrative. According to Peggy Phelan, the drive to know and forge understanding bulldozes over the usefulness of doubt and the productivity of uncertainty. Not only does the regime of “knowing” and “knowledge” promote inaccuracies, but also “commits us, however unwittingly, to a concomitant narrative of betrayal, disappointment, and rage. Expecting understanding and always failing to feel and see it, we accuse the other [and I would add oneself] of inadequacy and neglect.” ⁷³ But if we enter, investigate, and come out of projects, “recovery” ones included, unsure of where the poet stands, or even if s/he *does* stand, we might instead experience “the inevitability of misunderstanding as opportunities for conversation, . . . rather than a betrayal of a promise.” ⁷⁴

For some readers, Piatt, by being so irrevocably multi-voiced, may seem to have broken her “promise.” As a “crypto-modernist,” Piatt in a sense appears to have let readers such as Bennett down, readers who approach her poetry already “expecting” and “wanting” something specific from it. ⁷⁵ These readers disappointingly get what Giordano has called “something else,” something undefinable, unlocatable, something that resists tidy, putative notions of “sentimentality,” “modernism,” “postmodernism,” and even “woman.” ⁷⁶ When we approach poets with presupposed answers, expectations, or wants, the misunderstandings ensue: we find that some writers don’t fit neatly into our categories; their work thus becomes a problem to be resolved rather than a series of possibilities to be explored. Bennett herself seems to breathe a sigh of relief when she encounters one of Piatt’s poems that is “clear” to her; finally, a poem that is an “absolute delight” to read rather than a “problem” that one must “put up with.” ⁷⁷

My project, of course, like Bennett’s, aims to “know” Piatt’s work – but I hope I’ve offered a way to know a poet’s work by being open to *not* knowing it. Some might argue that I’ve substituted a label of “proto-postmodernist” for Bennett’s “proto-

feminist/modernist,” thereby silencing, just like New Critics, Piatt’s potentially pointed political and gendered agendas. Yet this essay hopes not to silence the possibilities of these affiliations as much as it aims to open up Piatt research to the potentials of *also* critiquing affiliations that she – and we as her early twenty-first century readers – nonetheless simultaneously use. Consequently, while we use terms such as “sentimentalism,” “modernism,” and “woman,” for instance, to generate inquiries, we might, to echo Butler, “continue *at the same time* to interrogate” such terms, to keep in mind that discourses leak, preceding and exceeding boundaries within which we imagine them. [78](#) Piatt’s work might be a theorization of reveling in and encouraging the curiosity and anxiety of questions, as well as of the possibilities and limits of identificatory positions, such as “woman,” without having to commit to and/or justify those positions, especially since the positions seem mobile and provisional. In this sense, Piatt offers not only an alternative to compulsory “identity,” but also an alternative to compulsory “disidentity.” Consequently, whereas Bennett announces Piatt as “indisputably a woman,” I respond by recalling Piatt’s own words from “The Palace-Burner”: “Well, yes –/ And something more.” [79](#)

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- [1](#).Cheryl Walker, *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*. ed. Cheryl Walker (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), xv.
 - [2](#).*Ibid.*, xlii.
 - [3](#).Matthew Giordano, "A Lesson From' the Magazines: Sarah Piatt and the Postbellum Periodical Poet," *American Periodicals* 16, 1 (2006), 23-51, 24.
 - [4](#).Walker, xvi.
 - [5](#).Paula Bernat Bennett, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), Preface.

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- [6.](#) Mary Poovey, "Positions: Recovery Redux: Recovering Ellen Pickering," in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13:2 (2000): 437-452, 437.
 - [7.](#) *Ibid.*, 450.
 - [8.](#) *Ibid.*, 451.
 - [9.](#) Mary Poovey, "A Response to Margaret Homans and Jill Campbell," in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13: 2 (2000): 467-468, 468.
 - [10.](#) Poovey, "Positions," 451.
 - [11.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [12.](#) Jill Campbell, "A Response to Mary Poovey's 'Recovering Ellen Pickering,'" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13:2 (2000), 461-465, 465.
 - [13.](#) Margaret Homans, "A Response to Mary Poovey's 'Recovering Ellen Pickering,'" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13:2 (2000): 453-460, 459.
 - [14.](#) Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 180.
 - [15.](#) "The End of the Commune—Execution of a Petroleuse." *Harper's Weekly* (July 8, 1871), 628.
 - [16.](#) Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xl.
 - [17.](#) *Ibid.*, Preface.
 - [18.](#) *Ibid.*, xl.
 - [19.](#) Although the University of Illinois Press rather than Bennett may have chosen this illustration for the front cover, editors/authors such as Bennett usually have a say as to what will appear on the cover of their books.
 - [20.](#) Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxvii.
 - [21.](#) *Ibid.*, Preface.
 - [22.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [23.](#) Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 196, 200.
 - [24.](#) Paula Bennett, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* (Maldon, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 1998), xxxiv.
 - [25.](#) Shira Wolosky, *Major Voices: 19th Century American Women's Poetry* (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2003), 9.
 - [26.](#) Bennett, *Anthology*, xxxix.
 - [27.](#) Wolosky, 2.
 - [28.](#) Bennett, *Anthology*, xxxvi.
 - [29.](#) *Ibid.*, xxix.
 - [30.](#) Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxxii.

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- [31](#).Bennett, *Anthology*, xxxvi.
 - [32](#).*Ibid.*
 - [33](#).*Ibid.*, xxxvii.
 - [34](#).Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxix.
 - [35](#).Giordano, 40. Even as I hesitate to totalize or homogenize Piatt's nineteenth-century readership, it's worth keeping in mind that many late nineteenth-century American readers considered women writers' work, what some have termed "intellectual labor," as less important and legitimate than what they considered the explicitly political and economic work associated with men. Helpful to remember as well is that social factors like a woman's race and class influenced her access and ability to publish marketable work.
 - [36](#).Piatt, qtd. in Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxix.
 - [37](#).Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxxii.
 - [38](#).*Ibid.*, xxxv, xxxix.
 - [39](#).Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5.
 - [40](#).*Ibid.*, 7.
 - [41](#).*Ibid.*, 14.
 - [42](#).Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxxv.
 - [43](#).*Ibid.*, xl.
 - [44](#).As Loeffelholz suggests, "all thinking, not only theoretically self-conscious . . . thinking, score[s] the traces of *difference*." *From School*, 4.
 - [45](#).Wolosky, 14.
 - [46](#).Loeffelholz, *From School*, 200.
 - [47](#).Piatt, qtd. in Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxxix.
 - [48](#).Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, Preface.
 - [49](#).Mary Loeffelholz, *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 154.
 - [50](#).*Ibid.*, 154, 166-67.
 - [51](#).Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 174.
 - [52](#).*Ibid.*, 180.
 - [53](#).Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xlvi.
 - [54](#).Giordano, 31.
 - [55](#).*Ibid.*, 26.
 - [56](#).*Ibid.*

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- [57.](#) Sarah Piatt, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, ed. Paula Bernat Bennett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 39.
 - [58.](#) Bennett qtd. in Giordano, 36-37.
 - [59.](#) Giordano, 34.
 - [60.](#) Piatt, 39.
 - [61.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [62.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [63.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [64.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [65.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [66.](#) Piatt, 40.
 - [67.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [68.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [69.](#) Loeffelholz, *From School*, 200-01.
 - [70.](#) Piatt, 40.
 - [71.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [72.](#) Loeffelholz, *From School*, 154.
 - [73.](#) Phelan, 174.
 - [74.](#) *Ibid.*
 - [75.](#) Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, I.
 - [76.](#) Giordano, 43.
 - [77.](#) Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxv, xxxvi, xxxi.
 - [78.](#) Butler, 179.
 - [79.](#) Piatt, 39.