

The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Paula Bernat Bennett by Dr. Elizabeth Renker

September 10, 2017 (Arlington, Massachusetts)

ER: Okay this is Professor Elizabeth Renker from the English Department at The Ohio State University. It is Sunday, September 10, 2017 and I am sitting in Arlington, Massachusetts with Professor Paula Bennett and have a fantastic opportunity to ask her to tell us the story of how she discovered Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, a poet who had essentially been lost to literary history and whom Professor Bennett came upon in her research--and later produced the first scholarly selected edition of Sarah's poems since Sarah's death in 1919. So, Paula, I'd like to just ask you to tell us the story of how you found Sarah, what year that was, how you feel things have gone since then, and what you think needs to happen next.

PB: Okay I've told this story more than once and I enjoy talking about it. I decided to work on an anthology of nineteenth-century American women's poetry ex-Emily Dickinson -- that is, there were a whole group of young poets or women poets who had been publishing at the same time as Dickinson before and after her and nobody had paid any attention to them. So, I was at Harvard at the time. I went to the Widener Library which had a fantastic collection of periodicals, and I started going through the periodicals rather than the books because partly it was just a more active kind of writing, you knew the date and had more information about the poems if you worked with the periodicals than if you worked from books and so on. So I started at A because I am an obsessive compulsive and I started going through every copy of every periodical -- it was insane -- in Harvard and I think this was from 1800 to about 1915 and I just went through one after another after another looking for women poets and I started collecting poems and as I went along I was beginning to realize that some of these poems were

really good. And I was getting fairly committed to this whole crazy project and I'd gotten up to the G's: *Galaxy*.

ER: *Galaxy* is a periodical of the time.

PB: Periodical, yes. And I came upon this poem –

ER: “Giving Back the Flower”?

PB: “Giving Back the Flower” and I read it and I'll never forget as long as I live my sensation when I read it. I didn't know the poet-- I never heard of her-- all I knew was that this was a great poem, and I mean great. Of all the poems she wrote, for me this is the most powerful, it's the most extraordinary -- and I was just incredibly lucky to get to that poem. I also realized as I was standing there that Piatt had to have written other poems because this poem was too good for her not to have been a professional writer. And so I realized I was going to have to go back to A and start looking specifically for her because I was sure that I had missed other poems by her -- which indeed I had -- because I had already gone through the A's which meant *The Atlantic*, and as I discovered, she had thirty poems in *The Atlantic* alone.

ER: Could you just talk for a minute-- because we have students listening, certainly, who haven't had experience working in periodicals--talk for a minute about why *The Atlantic*? You had already gotten from A to G, after the *Galaxy*. *Galaxy* had a broader somewhat different readership. Tell us a little bit about why *The Atlantic* is so important in this?

PB: Well *The Atlantic* is really important because, yeah, she had thirty poems in *The Atlantic*, no doubt about it. But they were poems that, on the whole, the reason why I hadn't picked up on her first, was because they were very conventional in comparison to something like--

ER: *The Galaxy*.

PB: *Galaxy*. It was more willing to experiment. And also tougher poems. And so, yeah, I had missed them, and in a sense some of them were miss-able, if you know what I mean.

ER: Very Interesting.

PB: I had to find her really serious poems--the ones that for me at least in terms of my thinking have been by far the most important were not *The Atlantic* poems, they were poems in newspapers, they were poems in odd places where she could really speak in her own voice -- I think more easily -- because she's a very ironic and difficult poet. And *The Atlantic* was prone to want poetry that was more -- not just conventional but more regular and wouldn't ruffle feathers quite so much. Piatt was really a political poet, a very deep political poet as far as I was concerned and none of her political poems got into *The Atlantic* -- I think even *Scribner's Monthly* did better than *The Atlantic*.

ER: It's a very, very interesting part of the story that when you did not yet know about her it should have been through reading the *Galaxy* that you found a poem that struck you as a great poem and then, if I'm understanding the story correctly, only later did you go back to *The Atlantic* poems, which, as you just said, were miss-able because they were publishing not necessarily the kinds of poems as *Galaxy*.

PB: Well, I was looking for poems that had character. I don't know how else to put this, you know what I mean? that made me, as Emily Dickinson says, feel like the top of my head had blown off. Out of all the poets that I worked with seriously of the 19th century and later years, every one of them had at least one or two poems like that that were really powerful. The difference between them and Piatt was that Piatt did this with extraordinary regularity (laughs), as I learned, whereas these other poets--they would have moments of just coming out with these marvelous poems and then the rest of their work would be conventional. And so it was just an incredibly lucky find for me, that I found "Giving Back the Flower," because it was unequivocally a great poem, and therefore it forced me to go back and take a look at

what I had missed. I did it immediately; I didn't wait. I said, "Okay, I have to start going forward, and then I have to go back."

ER: And you went back to A.

PB: I went back to A.

ER: Now another thing you've just said that I know will be very interesting to our audience--and this I think comes back to the issue that by the time this happened to you as a scholar you already had a lot of experience reading 19th century poems, because I know when I speak publically about Piatt and I talk about my first reading of her and realizing she was great, people often say "how did you know?" So students and general readers often have this question--sort of, "What was the basis for judgment? How could one poem have that effect on you?" So, what I want to return to for those listeners we have is that you--it sounds like if I'm getting your story right-- you had this experience in part just because you simply had such a large database in your head of other poems people were writing at the same time and within that universe of poems this one stood out. Is that accurate?

PB: Yes, I mean I didn't have half the number of poems in my head at the time that I found "Giving Back the Flower" as I have now because I was still in the fairly early stages of this project. I had decided, as I said, to do an anthology of nineteenth-century American women's poetry eighteen-hundred to a little bit past nineteen-hundred. And so it was-- you know, as far as I'm concerned...you know when you're dealing with a great poem when, as I said, as Dickinson said, you get this feeling, this rush; the language, the concepts meld in such a way that it's breathtaking. And I think that for different people there are different poems that elicit that kind of response. I am assuming that there are people who would not get turned on -- if that's okay to use that expression -- by "Giving Back the Flower" but might find another one of her poems just so stunning that they want to go on with her. The quality of a poet to me is almost measured by the kinds of poems, their ability, their different abilities to arouse that kind of desire in a

reader to go on with this poet, to find out what else they said, to connect with them. It is not something that you can go to a list of qualities and say, "Okay if the poet has them and this and this and this then it's a great poem" -- that will not work. You have to have some kind of strong response to it--an emotional response really.

ER: Well, I think another topic that comes up here certainly for our students and our general audience would be that sometimes our contemporaries find it difficult to read nineteenth-century poems because of the style, the poetic diction, what they perceive to be of the remoteness of the utterance compared to very contemporary poems. So this might give us an opportunity to talk about how you feel about Sarah finding her moment now with contemporary readers. Do you think that's something that can and will happen?

PB: One of the weird things that happened with Piatt and it astonishes me to this day and it says something about cultural currents -- unarticulated cultural currents -- in the environment. When I found Piatt, to my knowledge nobody in the world knew about Piatt except me. That she had been completely lost. I did not know that there was a young woman going to Dartmouth [Jessica Roberts] who was doing her honors paper on Sarah Piatt. She had been an assistant to Professor [William] Spengemann there and she had fallen in love with Piatt, not with "Giving Back the Flower" but with another poem and that she is still writing on because she loves it so much. It's this passion that you can get with Piatt's poems that sometimes fascinates me, but in any case -- so, and then there was a third person who came who was a minister I believe [Larry R. Michaels], wasn't he?

ER: Yes, he still is.

PB: And he had found Piatt also. Both Jess and Larry were not professional professors, they were not academics, but what they did do was they showed that this poet had a staying power among very, very different people and that it was a very important moment for me to realize that -- you know -- it was just

by luck that as that happened not only that I had discovered her but I was the first one to publish – no, did Larry’s book come out -- ?

ER: Larry’s book came out in ‘99.

PB: ‘99, so his book actually came out before my book.

ER: And the Penguin edition edited by William Spengemann and Jessica Roberts you were just referring to was published in, I believe, ‘96, and then your edition *Palace-Burner* came out in 2001, so you’re talking about this moment when she was being discovered by individuals unaware of one another, and when I teach Piatt, I often tell that story. I talk about all these people unbeknownst to one another quote unquote “discovering her at the same time.” And the anecdote I tell, which many of them know from former schooling, is what we talk about in the history of science, the discovery of calculus by Leibniz and Newton at the same time.

PB: Also in electricity.

ER: Oh, good point!

PB: That’s why I said it’s cultural currents that are moving toward something where there are a whole group of people that are seeing the same thing but they are not talking to each other (laughs).

ER: So maybe this could take us we are going to have this interesting freewheeling conversation of topics tied to one another, but I know my own experience with teaching Sarah and talking about her to graduate students, undergraduates, the general public: she really speaks to people now. And I think it’s fair to say – you and I both have done a lot of work on this topic – it’s fair to say that although she was very popular in her own time, by the time of her death in 1919 she was falling out of print.

PB: I think what happened there is that nineteenth-century poets were very skilled at rhyme and it was desired partly because the nineteenth century as a whole, the readers and writers really liked rhyme,

they saw poetry as a part of music and they enjoyed it; it's part of what gave them pleasure when they were reading. And after the turn of the century, there was this shift to free verse, and free verse -- it's very hard to listen to free verse and then go back and read rhymed poetry for a lot of people. I know my students when I started bringing in Piatt's poems, most of them could not get over the fact that she was rhyming and they didn't like it. It felt uncomfortable for them. That wasn't the kind of rhythm that they were accustomed to which was -- free verse is a marvelous way to write poetry, but so is rhyming, they're too very different. And I don't know how you feel about it, but I think they clash. I think it's very hard to move from one to the other. I know I have one poet in the anthology who did start out rhyming, and this is toward the end of the century, and then she shifted over to free verse late in her life, but most of the people who rhymed stuck to rhyming their whole life. And when free verse came along, those that were writing free verse *just* could not tolerate rhyme. So she was caught in that. She, as somebody who did rhyme--and the fact that she also wrote a lot of poems about motherhood and various other things that the twentieth century really turned against, particularly the women poets because they did not want to be seen as like the archetypal Emily Granger...Grangerford poet.

ER: Grangerford. Emily Grangerford, right? Twain's, uh...

PB: Yeah, this mock poet, Twain has a marvelous fun with. And I love what he does with it. He's absolutely right-

ER: She's Emmeline I think. Emmeline Grangerford: she could write a poem about anything "so long as it was sadful" [both laugh].

PB: Precisely. You know. You can understand why the twentieth century women did not want to be identified with that kind of poetry and male -- well, I don't want to get too far into this, but most male readers do not want to read women's poetry, and they don't value it, and it doesn't have for them the cultural power of male poetry, and therefore she was lost. And there were those who knew that this

really wonderful poet had once lived, but basically she was totally buried. She did not have what kept some of the other nineteenth-century women poets alive. She did not have one thing that they had, which was coterie of friends who protected their reputation to some extent, or something else that would've allowed them to be kept in historical memory. And so how and people like that they were a whole group of them Emily, Emma Lazarus for different reasons where at least name recognition existed. With Piatt – nothing, absolutely nothing. Because she was an oddball. She was born in the South, her family was slaveholders, she married John James Piatt in '61 and came North, but she was always seen as a Southerner even though she got out of the South. And she was antislavery, but she wasn't an activist in any way. She became a mother and was raising her children and she really didn't know how to build her reputation in any case she was not that kind of a writer; she wrote for the love of writing.

ER: Now, this is something of a tangent, but you and I share the interest in producing new waves of scholarship, looking ahead to the future where many, many more people will join the hunt for historical and biographical information about Sarah that you could certainly not take on yourself in your first earliest wave of recovering her. And as you know when you research the Piatts (both Sarah and her husband John James), in nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers and reviews and so on, they usually describe her as a “western poet,” sometimes align her with Ohio, which is of course the state she moved to when she married into the Ohio Piatt family. But you raise the issue that she was born in Kentucky in 1836 into a family that owned slaves. And one thing I'm wondering about is her accent?

PB: She spoke with a Southern accent.

ER: Are you aware of any sources where people talk about how she sounded?

PB: Yes, Katharine Tynan.

ER: Katharine Tynan does?

PB: Yes. She had a soft southern accent. “Y’all” [laughs] that’s how she would speak. And when she was sitting at the dinner table with the family; she had seven children and six of them very active -- or over active -- young men who liked to go out and shoot things and apparently were very boisterous. They were home-schooled a good part of the time and they were – I think a few of them were somewhat crazy. And she herself, according to Tynan, she would just sit there at the table and when her husband would reprimand them she would say, “Now, now John, don’t” [laughs] and this was very southern. I didn’t really--really understood in some ways how very southern she was. She was living a double life, and that double life is something basic to the female culture in the South. They did not argue; they did not fight; they did not stand up for their rights; if they agreed to do anything, they had to do it behind doors; if they saw anything that a man did that was wrong, they had to say it behind doors, but they would prefer not to. The South had a very strong patriarchal streak in it and the Southern woman felt that she had to really support her husband, and it was a very hard life. And Piatt who was – I think – probably a good deal smarter than her husband. She knew they had run into debt, and it was getting worse and worse and worse; they ended up in total poverty. You know he was not a competent provider. The one really good job that he had that he was successful at, interestingly enough, was in Ireland; he was American Consul to Cork, and that was a very very successful period in his life, and it lasted for about ten years. But she went down with him; she was totally loyal; this was all Southern. And I had really not fully appreciated how Southern she was until I started working with her early poetry – that is, poetry written before 1861 while she was a young woman in the South. And it just opened up, so much, my understanding, and I didn’t understand this when I was writing the selected edition. I dismissed the early poetry, and it was the very worst mistake I made. And I don’t think-- you know, when you come first on something, and where you’re really doing the kind of biographical work that I had to do--just to do a selected edition and to talk about her. But, in any case, I made a very bad mistake.

ER: Well, we mentioned earlier the issue that, when you discover someone new, you can only tackle so much of the information. And, again, this is much easier for people who do this kind of work to understand. It's something that I find students and general audiences are actually extremely interested in once you explain: what does it mean to do scholarly detective work? And that you actually have to go out there and find the records. People tend to think of great poets as poets who are available between the covers of a book: "I can get the book and it will tell me about this person." And so to get people in touch with what it means to say, 'No, there were no books," so that means you are going to scattered libraries perhaps all over the world. As in the case of Piatt, to get into the Irish materials you have to find the stuff, and so this was one of the projects you undertook in *Palace-Burner*, your selected edition, and I think I'm recalling correctly that you did include three of her [pre-1861] poems, and of course let's remind our listeners that those poems you're talking about now from before 1861 are before she married into the Piatt family. So, at that time she was Sarah Morgan Bryan but also publishing under a bunch of different names, right? Sometimes Sallie, sometimes Sallie M. B. And so even finding her in that sense becomes complicated.

PB: I should also add there were 160 of those poems [laughs].

ER: And we're talking about poems now that were published in the *Louisville Daily Journal* and the *New York Ledger*, right?

PB: It was sort of like there was an embarrassment of riches here. I think one of the reasons I misread the poems so badly – this is the early poems -- was I just couldn't face having to deal with 600 poems.

ER: That is a great issue to bring up, again talking to people about what it *means* to do this kind of work. In order to get a book into print and to say "Look, I've found this great new poet," you simply cannot do everything in the very first installment of this kind of discovery, right?

PB: Well, I could have never have found a publisher for it.

ER: Right, good point, yes—and again audiences don't understand that.

PB: It's as simple as that. That if you're going to do an edition of an unknown poet you do not start with the entire work no matter how good it is. You have got to give people a taste first because the publishers are not going to risk putting out an expensive book of 600 poems. *Palace-Burner* is 100-and-something poems. It was sort of which child are you going to keep and which are you going to kill? [laughs]. It was very, very hard, but you have to realize that if she's as good as you think she is, which I really believe Sarah is, then people are going to come along later and they'll publish these other poems. They will get published eventually.

ER: So this is – I think – this a great opportunity for us to move on to the issue of where you think we are. And when I say we, I mean both the profession of scholarship in nineteenth-century American materials and also “we” in the very general sense of American culture in terms of reclaiming Sarah; where do you think we are and where do you think we're headed? What would you like to see happen with Sarah?

PB: Well, I know you asked me about Sarah and Dickinson so this is probably the best place to put this in terms of the reformation of Dickinson. They did exactly what I'm saying, which is they produced a small book first.

ER: You mean scholars when they first found Dickinson?

PB: Yes, well I'm not talking about scholars, I'm talking about Higginson.

ER: Okay, we are talking after Emily Dickinson's death.

PB: Yeah after Dickinson's death when they finally found that, you know, she had how many hundreds of poems?

ER: 1800.

PB: 1800 poems. That many of which had never seen the light of day; they were in her desk and that's it, or bureau rather. And because that first edition sold so well there was a new edition with more poems and then there was a new edition of *more* poems, and they let them out in small pieces, and it was because it takes time for people to absorb a whole lot of poems. And once they did, they didn't get a complete version of Dickinson's poems for another hundred years, if I'm right, or at least 75-- somewhere between 75 and a hundred years. Because we look back now and "why weren't they all published?"--and you couldn't do it at the beginning, you simply couldn't. And then along with the fact that you finally get people to start reading these poems, you also hope that they will start bringing in, academics will come along and will start bringing in biographies and critical studies and all the other things that we associate with Dickinson now. And you think, "they must have been there forever," but they weren't. They again come in slowly. There's a kind of pattern, really, to the discovery of a writer. I think we were talking also about Melville, and I think it's I think the same story. A little bit is there and then they start moving and they develop more and more around the poet. When I first got involved with Dickinson, and this was in the 70's, I went there and at that time she was no one, basically, except to some kind of eccentric women who seemed to think she was a very fine poet and it took a long time for Dickinson. She is now unquestionably our greatest poet as far as I'm concerned.

ER: Well, I think, given that statement you just made, you're going to get a lot of kickback from the Walt Whitman people, if no one else, but you're entitled to your judgment!

PB: I think she's a better poet. It's partly her ability to write, use images to create questions, again, the power of her writing that just runs right through you (as I said), but different people have different favorite writers, otherwise it'd be pretty boring.

ER: Well, as you know, we've been discussing Sarah Piatt since we met *through* Sarah Piatt about 15 years ago.

PB: Was it 15 years?

ER: Something like that. I can think about the exact date. I think I first wrote to you in 2001.

PB: Oh good, I need that date.

ER: Yeah, 2001. And I've taught Piatt now to undergraduates and graduate students for many years, and they love her instantly. They find it hard to believe that people didn't love her. So telling the story about her coming back is always very interesting in the classroom, and one of the questions I pose to them is: why do you think she's finding an audience now? They always have very interesting answers to this, and one of their answers comes back again to an argument you have made, so let me ask you about that now. They say they really appreciate her irony, and they feel that we live in an age of irony, that their generation is a generation that appreciates irony. So could you talk a little bit about whether you feel that's part of why she's getting an audience now?

PB: Absolutely, this is what makes her "modern," if I dare to use the word. If you are told by your culture that you cannot speak honestly, forthrightly, and critically the way you see the world, which Piatt couldn't from the get-go, all of her poetry is ironic. It isn't simply the poems that she wrote after 1861: her early poems are built on irony also. She could put it in her verse--what she was really thinking. And what happens is you get these-- poem after poem--there's this gulf between the conventional world, the world that nineteenth-century people (and then even twentieth-century people) wanted to believe the world was like, and her own knowledge of what it was *really* like, whether it was slavery or the treatment of the peasantry in Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century which she writes about. She has a wonderful poem called "In Primrose Time" and it starts out with everything's lovely in Ireland during primrose time, springtime and everybody loves everybody and the lamb and the – what was it?

ER: The white lamb and the black lamb.

PB: Are happy together and all this kind of thing and she says – you’re better at remembering lines than I am! – it could all be wiped away with a drop of honey-- a thousand years of crime! [laughs]. And you know, it comes at the very end of the poem-- and the last couple of lines, it wipes out the entire whole previous poem. But I have had reader after reader who does not get it. They miss it, fly right over it-- and this is what I mean about the essential southernness, southern woman in her poems-- that she is able to devise these poems that say two things at once. And if you want to believe that she’s the sweet lamb [laughter] and just a very docile mother, fine, you can read the poems that way until you see that one line. Then all of a sudden you realize that they’re far from being supportive of the environment as it was. She was highly, highly critical.

ER: And this takes us back to the issue, first of all, of how we might think of her and Dickinson as contemporaries, which they were, and also about why she was lost and then rediscovered. Because, as you and I both know from reading lots of reviews in the nineteenth century, Sarah was often described as, in quotes, “sweet,” a “sweet singer,” and so on. So we get back to what women poets were expected to do. What were their poems expected to talk about-- and what were readers reading for?

PB: What they were reading for was much more musical. They identify poetry with music, and if you were Edmund Stedman [poet and influential literary arbiter Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908)] and a wonderful example of this where for him poetry was supposed to be music and everything was supposed to be – [laughs] you’re smiling.

ER: Well, I’m smiling because, you know, I’m thinking here’s a poet that a lot of our audience probably is not familiar with for very interesting reasons, but I’m thinking of her fellow Southerner, Sidney Lanier, who has mostly been lost now. Some people are starting to write about him again, but he defined poetry as music and had very complicated theories of poetry as music, as you know. And it’s very hard

for readers in our time to read his poems and understand that part of it. That part of what they were doing with their musical theories is very hard for contemporary readers to understand.

PB: We don't think about poetry as music anymore unless it's rap music [laughs].

ER: Well, good connection coming back to your topic of rhyme! I think a lot of undergraduates now can connect especially with what you were saying earlier about poetry as music once you point out that rap is poetry and is driven by beat and rhyme, and then it's easier for them to say "Oh! Oh! That's a big part of what they were doing."

PB: But, see, the rhyme and the music in the nineteenth century was much simpler I think, and it was not socially -- rap is talking about society, and I guess "dreams" may be the right word for what goes on in a lot of nineteenth-century poetry.

ER: That's a great topic, yeah, and the topic of dreams. You've written recently about Southern women poets in particular and dreams that turn into nightmares.

PB: And Piatt was, and basically Southern women were having nightmares and it was -- their poetry is filled with this kind of terror, pain, or else grief. So I've become very interested in Southern women poets because of this and because Sarah--when I began to realize that Sarah was a Southern poet, I started to really try to understand Southern women's poetry and it's nightmare poetry--a lot of it.

ER: Now linking Sarah as a Southerner who moved to Ohio and then of course is -- you and I have talked about this at some length -- she lived in several other places including Washington D.C. and then of course she was in Ireland for 11 years, but finally came back to North Bend, Ohio. So in a lot of ways she also then became an Ohio poet or a Western poet. Ohio was called the West at that time. So comparing Sarah to these other Southern women poets you're talking about who wrote about these, you call them

fever dreams or nightmares – Do you think there’s a difference in Sarah’s poetry because she left the South?

PB: I doubt you could find a better example of a poet moving from one style to another. Her Southern poetry is very ironic and very, very lush; the imagery is lush. This is partly what confused me. I didn’t hear the high irony behind the lushness. I made the same mistake that others have made with her later poetry – seeing the surface and not seeing what was underneath it, missing the irony. What happened was, when she moved North, the South was still very much involved with Byron. And Byron was a very strong influence on Southern poetry, and it wasn’t appropriate for a woman to read Byron, but all the girls loved him [laughs], and so this was all coming. It was very clear. The poems were very long. The imagery was – as I said – very lush. She started moving at the very end just before she left the South for the North, she started writing shorter poems. And they were still in iambic pentameter -- most of her Southern poetry is in iambic pentameter. When she went North, she started writing iambic tetrameter and she started rhyming much more conventionally, if you will. And it’s like a totally different voice. But the person for, the mentor for her new writing--in terms of irony--was Browning.

ER: Robert Browning?

PB: Robert Browning. That’s right. Thank you for clarifying that because there’s a big difference. She followed Robert Browning and you get this ironic -- incredibly ironic -- poetry that she starts developing through dialogue. And she starts having these poems where her children are interlocutors with the voice of the mother. And the mother very often will say xxx but there is this tension between the mother’s way of looking at the world (which most of the time is very bitter and very angry) and the way the child looks at the world, or the child says something that the mother meditates on--she realizes the truth of it and the sadness of it. And you get these very complex dialogue poems, and it’s like apples and oranges; it’s just two totally different ways of writing between those two periods.

ER: And this is a great example, isn't it, to come back to our original point of discussion, that you found this poet; all this work needed to be done. In more recent years you've gone back to the poems she wrote before 1861 and said, "This is another major body of work; I didn't include it the first time; we need to go back to it now, and we can understand it in a new way." And that you *yourself* are seeing irony there that you missed the first time. So it's opened all these doors for work we need other people to do.

PB: Yeah, we might as well say here--I'm eighty-one [laughs] and I would absolutely love to do more on Piatt, but I felt like my mission, if you want to call it that, because it really was for me it was a mission, was not just Piatt. She was my most favorite poet, she was the finest poet that I found, but I found a whole lot of other poets that I felt deserved to be brought back, deserved to be respected. Poetry for women – we have to make a distinction between male and female poetry in the nineteenth century to some extent because the women were much more – they had a lot more political beefs than the men did. The men were the ones with the problem of being conventional. They were very romantic about women and, you know, again going back to Stedman, that they wanted a world, a dreaming world, also in terms of their own--with the kind of thing that you're doing now in your new book [*Realist Poetics in American Culture, 1866-1900* [Oxford UP, 2018], where you talk about poetry's high calling. Women did not write because they wanted a high calling, with the possible exception of Dickinson and Piatt. They wrote partly to make money, because this was one way [to make money], and also because they were not allowed to say things either. But unlike where Southern women could not say things anywhere, women in the North were able to use their poetry as a political discourse, and they did. And so you got these wonderful, angry poems about the way in which they were treated and some of them are absolutely brilliant; they're really moving and wonderful poems. So I felt like I had to, when I did both (not just the anthology, I did a book on women's poetry in the 19th century), I felt that it was really a responsibility that I had that I couldn't just drop them and spend all my time on Piatt. Because then I

would be doing what this culture had already done and said, "Okay well there's one women poet in the nineteenth century who is worth studying, and all the rest of them are what we thought they were- which is no good." And that's what would have happened if I had just kept on pushing Piatt and not looking at these other poets.

ER: So perhaps another lesson- we're drawing near the end of our time talking today--but you and I have both been working in the profession of literary studies for a long time and nineteenth-century America for a long time, and we share this interest in the rediscovery of Sarah Piatt, but I think it's important also to say to our audience that Paula Bennett has just been referring to an anthology she produced of American women poets. There are a lot of poets in there! We pulled the book off the shelf the other day and we were looking at it. So you could say we also have our blinders, whatever they are; every generation does. There's a possibility that there are other poets out there--that someone will come along and see what that poet was doing and has done in a way that I can't see, that Paula can't see, that no one has seen yet--and that person also might become a fresh voice that people read in a new way and understand in a new way, right Paula? So one great story here--Paula mentioned this briefly earlier and I like to tell this story because audiences connect with it. Because pretty much everyone has heard of Herman Melville and understands that he's an internationally great writer. And yet to remind people that, a hundred years ago, he was an unknown writer and was rediscovered in the 1920s and defined as great *at that time* is a very important story. It reminds us that history is always changing, how people understand literature is always changing. The story of Emily Dickinson is one that shows us that kind of change again, and we're in that moment right now with Sarah Piatt. So, Paula, if you could just share with us a couple of things you would like to see happen, practical things you would like to see happen in Piatt studies, say in the next ten years? It sounds like you have a really strong interest in seeing people tackle those earlier poems that haven't been collected and published.

PB: Oh yeah [laughs]! That's one of them. They really need to be published one way or another. You've had a project at OSU that has put digital versions or will put digital versions of the early poetry on the web. And I want to see the poems from *The Journal* also put on the web because they're really important, and they open -- put the two groups of poems together and you find that she was stringing story lines between the two sets of poems. So, poems that you get in *The Journal*, the issues reflected in them are also reflected in *The Ledger*, and she's weaving together events with the speakers that are occurring in both sets of poems. It's absolutely fascinating. I don't know how she kept all those balls in the air. She needs a biography. She needs a concordance. She needs all the -- oh!

ER: All those tools!

PB: All those tools that mark canonization and that enable scholars to do the work they do, and they can't do it without them. And at the moment she's got only one selected edition. There may be three versions of it out there, but selected editions and that's it. What I want to see for Sarah is -- also however she gets into classrooms everywhere, that she's accepted as a necessary poet for the canon and a lot of things that come with that too, you know, having students write on her, using them in the classroom, getting her work appreciated for lay people (as we call them) where you have ordinary people who love poetry (and there are lots of them) are reading her poems and doing things with them and-- I collect those things on the web, try to figure out who's doing what with Piatt, and I mix it up with both ordinary people who are buying Piatt and just love her and get these marvelous paeans to Piatt and academics who are working on her. So there's a huge community around any poet (if they're going to get into the canon) that's necessary.

ER: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today, and certainly we all appreciate the pioneering role you played in bringing Sarah to attention. I myself, remember the very first time I read one of her poems, when she had me at the very first line, literally, and it was a career changing

experience for me! So, I'm sure on behalf of everyone who's listening to this recording too, we offer you our thanks--and is there anything you would like to say in closing?

PB: Go read Piatt and have fun[laughs]!

ER: Okay good, all right, thank you so much Paula!

PB: Yep.