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Transnational Influence in the Poetry of Sarah Piatt: Poems of Ireland and the American Civil War

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Transnational Influence in the Poetry of Sarah Piatt:
Poems of Ireland and the American Civil War

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Sarah Piatt, a recently recovered nineteenth century poet, is best known, where she is known at all, as an American poet. While this label is certainly appropriate, it should not obscure Piatt's decidedly international focus, or more precisely, her transnational focus, especially in regard to Ireland. Piatt's verse, considered by some to be the best poetry of her time second only to the work of Emily Dickinson, is remarkable for its quantity and breadth, but more importantly, for its subversive use of genteel style. Though her poems are generally divided into four overlapping categories, the two thematic classes of her poetry that will be explored in the most detail here are her Civil War poems and her "Irish poems," which were inspired by an eleven year experience living in Ireland while her husband acted as an American Consul. These poems are examined through close reading and transnational analysis, as a conceptual link exists between Piatt's perspective of the American South during the American Civil War and her depiction of social injustice in her poems about Ireland and the Irish peasantry. These different contexts illustrate how Piatt brings her experience of civil strife and injustice in the United States to Ireland with her, influencing her understanding of political events in Ireland and her sympathies toward the destitute Irish people. As these conceptual ligaments are rarely one-sided, this paper seeks to illuminate the multi-directional nature of the transnational influence that impacts the way that Sarah Piatt's poetry negotiates understanding at both local and global levels.

The identity Piatt shapes in her Civil War poems is distinctly Southern, peppered though it may be with Northern sensibilities. Her Civil War poems are an attempt to come to terms with the violence and destruction of the war—a war in which Piatt can sympathize with both sides. Born as the daughter of a well-known slave owning family in Kentucky, she moved north to Washington, D.C. when she was married to John

James Piatt, an Ohioan, in 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War (Bennett, xxv).

Despite their move to the North and Sarah Piatt's subsequent divorce from the Southern way of life, she often returned home to Kentucky to visit "against the backdrop of a war in which she could not take sides without betraying someone or something" (Bennett, xxv). Yet throughout her Civil War poems, Piatt maintains a Southern bent—the focus not so much on overtly partisan political topics such as the righteousness of the North or abolition or even states' rights, but rather the violence and destruction of the war itself on her home, the Southern way of life, and the many lives left in its wake. In *Hemispheric American Studies*, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine argue that the concept of nationhood and national identity is no simple matter of boundaries or intrinsic nation-ness, but rather that nationhood is "a relational identity that emerges through constant collaboration, dialogue, and dissension" (5). Taken this way, relational identity becomes something that is dynamic and undergoes constant negotiation, testing, and renegotiation. Yet Piatt's relational identity is not simply an American one, and her poetic engagement with national and international themes does not come from a coherent nationally situated identity. However, Piatt uses a Southern United States identity, often very specifically situated as a Kentuckian identity. Instead of using a national referent to interact and participate with the rest of the world, her grounding throughout her work is Southern, and it is with this lens that she engages with her surroundings.

The Southern consciousness that Piatt maintains in her work is one that she brings with her to the North, and later, to Ireland. She uses it as a point of comparison, sometimes almost a template for writing about what is going on around her, whether she is writing from Cincinnati, Washington, D.C, or County Cork. Piatt's deepest

concerns and most burning questions about the Civil War in the South are the same concerns and questions she addresses in Ireland when facing the desolate poverty and civil discontent over home rule: Is there really such a thing as purely just and purely unjust? What happens when the laws are unjust and people follow them—are individuals wrong for doing so? When laws change and people do not, who is to be held accountable? Who is responsible for want and human suffering?

Rather than attempt to answer such questions, Piatt weaves them throughout her verse, raising them as difficulties that deserve anything but simple solutions, and are perhaps even unanswerable. In her recent work, Jess Roberts has convincingly argued that Piatt's grammar itself is wrought with a doubleness that both challenges and bends to nineteenth century literary convention—troubling and questioning the very forms and tropes she works within (173). This is a particularly useful lens with which to understand Piatt, as Roberts' application to Piatt's grammar is one that is mirrored in Piatt's very choice of subjects and imagery. It is a small wonder Piatt has only recently been resurrected from her fate as a genteel poet—she makes use of genteel subjects and images in ways that are subtle and not always entirely subversive. Rather than directly challenging the nineteenth century expectations of proper women's poetry, she works these expectations in unusual ways, from the inside out, allowing very strong statements to be made with all the delicacy and grace required of a woman poet. Her subjects are often mothers and daughters and children, and her imagery is rich with seemingly sentimental reflections and floral or fairy scenes. Piatt's preoccupation with women's lives and the maternal are so pervasive that Mary Wearn argues that "motherhood is the critical site of Piatt's cultural argument" and that Piatt "recognized the political and cultural currency of the maternal, finding in motherhood the critical intersection of

women's private and public lives" (164). In spite of these feminine topics and devices, Piatt works irony and doubt into her verse to ultimately trouble her ostensibly genteel lines, challenging cultural norms, even if not directly discrediting them.

Piatt uses the fair/fairy/fairy tale imagery over and over again in her poetry, especially in connection with place and politics. Piatt's use of fairyland, a seemingly genteel sentiment, is converted to an entirely new meaning when used in conjunction with sites of devastation and violence, and in this sense, Piatt builds on an ironic concept of fairyland in which the term indicates that something lies beneath the idyllic veneer. It is an indication that we have missed something important—often, a history of violence or oppression. This thread is one we can trace in both her Civil War poems and in many of her Irish poems.

One such poem is "Over in Kentucky," in which Kentucky is constructed by the poem's speakers, a mother and daughter, as the idealized opposite of their new Northern home in Cincinnati, "the smokiest city in the world" (ln 1). The dialogue between these two subjects serves to situate the speakers in both time and place, as well as an entry into the somber reflections of the main speaker, the mother—a strategy that Piatt employs regularly (Bennett, xxxv). The mother chooses not to talk to her daughter about the ugliness of slavery or "how fierce the master's hold,/Spite of all armies, kept the slave within" (ln 15-16). Instead, the mother makes a conscious decision to represent Kentucky as a place of slaves' "glad songs" from before "the Southern sword knew blood and rust" (ln 18, 19).

Yet, the mother recognizes this conscious attempt to idealize the South, including her own complicity in this by writing stories and poems, creating fairy tales out of "fairy pictures from [her] fairy years" for her daughter (ln 24). She explains, "I have a

phantom pencil that can make/Shadows of moons, far back and faint, to rise/On dewier grass and in diviner skies,/Over in Kentucky” (ln 25-28). Through this “phantom pencil,” the speaker can remember and resurrect what is left of memories of Kentucky from before the Civil War, from “shadows of moons” that rose on “dewier grass and in diviner skies.” Through this seemingly innocent desire to kindly remember the past, the speaker does something else unintended and consequential. By repeating these fantasy images that glorify the South as a “diviner” place, the speaker is perpetuating the romantic vision of the South at the expense of reality. She deliberately skips recent history, and moves to memories from “before wild cavalry sprang from the dust” (ln 20). In this way, the speaker is complicit in the romantic myth by passing the fairy tale down to her daughter, who begins to wish that she too, could live in this fairy land she desires: “My sash is tied and if my hair was curled,/I’d like to have my prettiest hat and go...Over in Kentucky” (ln 3-4, 7). The naïve speaker, the daughter, feels that Kentucky is a place of beauty and perfection, somewhere clearly better than where she is, and she too must look the part to go there.

Of course, the young daughter cannot go to this place. The Ohio River, “wider than the sea” that separates the North and South as “a visible moan/Between two worlds—one fair, one dear” (ln 30-31) may be a physical boundary that prevents the speakers from returning to their fantasy home in Kentucky, but the passage of time, both because of the destruction of the war and the revelations that maturity brings, have reduced Kentucky to “ever-glimmering stone,/Weird-whispering ruin, graves where legends hide” (ln 32-33). Piatt uses this imagery to root antebellum Kentucky in the realm of Old World mythology, harkening images of ancient ruins and age-old stone. This place of myth and mystery cannot be rediscovered because it “lies in mist upon the

charmèd side,/Over in Kentucky” (ln 34-35). The “charmèd side” is not simply the other side of the river, but a great gulf in time and reality. There is a temporal barrier between here and there, and even if the physical barrier could be crossed, the Kentucky the mother brings to life for her daughter no longer exists, even in the mother’s daydreams, if in fact, it ever did exist at all.

This is an example of the irony on which Piatt constructs the fairy tale references, as she did not view fairy tales as a neutral story, but rather as a romantic one that, through this idealization, can cause great consequences. Paula Bernat Bennett, the scholar chiefly responsible for the recovery of Piatt, argues that Piatt viewed “antebellum romantic fantasies” toward gender and marriage critically (xliii). As regards sexual relationships and marriage, romanticized visions of the South acted as “a veil disguising the economic motives that drove (landless) men and women to pursue (landed) members of the opposite sex in an economy in which land, fortune, and status were one” (xliii). While Bennett applies the distrust of romantic idealizations to relationships between men and women, it is evident that Piatt also distrusted the idealized version of the South and life in general. Fairy tales and romance, especially when used to describe real people, events and places, can act as dangerous delusions, able to hide very real violence, oppression, and political realities that are worth exposing. Faith Barrett, when examining the use of fairyland in Piatt’s war poems, argues that fairyland is “inseparable not only from the guilt she feels about her family’s participation in slavery but also from her knowledge of the devastation of the South caused by the Civil War, a war that was waged to preserve her childhood world” (198). As Barrett notes, the connections between race and Piatt’s use of fairyland are undeniable, though I would add that in addition to the apparent guilt concerning slavery

itself and destruction of the South, is another more subtle guilt—the guilt and consequences of romantic literary and cultural representations that act as persuasive rhetorical devices that perpetuate violence on behalf of such idealization, and the moral conflict that arises when portraying the South, as demonstrated by the conflicting worlds the mother-storyteller must choose in “Over in Kentucky.”

Of the two worlds put in opposition or conflict in the poem, Kentucky is the “fair” side of the river. Piatt’s use of the word “fair,” besides the clear connection to the fairy tale theme throughout the poem, as well as the suggestion that what is fair is more delicate, soft, and pleasant (think of the old reference to women as “the fairer sex”), is also racially charged. Fairness has clear connotations to whiteness, and in this instance, the dual symbolism of whiteness and fairy tales within this one word, and in direct association with Kentucky, invokes a chain of complex meaning. The fairy tale of the South is a white person’s myth. None of the African American slaves emancipated during the Civil War would likely idealize the slave owning South, and they were well aware of the violence before, during, and after the war. Even in the daughter’s request to hear of the poem, we can see that a certain kind of disregard for reality is a prerequisite for the telling of fairy tale, as she explains to her mother “Though it may be better to be free,/I’d rather have things as they used to be” (ln 12-13). The speaker of the poem, by merely remembering this romantic vision to her daughter, is participating in and perpetuating a fairy tale that is racially determined and obscures this history of violence and racism. This “fair” world is on the opposite side of the spectrum from the “dear” world, in which the speaker values and holds closer reality and truth, including the reality of her own life—the life that gives her her daughter. The closing stanza of the poem reads thus:

The dear has restless, dimpled, pretty hands,
Yearning toward unshaped steel, unfancied wars,
Unbuilt cities, and unbroken lands,
With something sweeter than the faded stars
And dim, dead dewes of my lost romance, found
In beauty that has vanished from the ground,
Over in Kentucky. (ln 29-35)

The maternal speaker in the poem recognizes that the “fair” story she tells to her daughter no longer holds the same charm for her and she is not enchanted by such fantasy stories that obscure truth. The “restless, dimpled, pretty hands” of her daughter are what matter to her now, and despite her child’s innocent yearning for the fairy tale, the mother is disillusioned, and tells these stories wearily to appease the daughter, whose “two eyes, half-full of tears,/ Half-full of sleep would love to keep awake/With fairy pictures from [her] fairy years” (ln 15-17). Importantly, if the speaker could choose between her “fairy pictures” and the “dear” world of reality, she would choose the latter.

We see this same use of the fairy words in the poem about Piatt’s childhood slave nanny in “The Black Princess,” in which Piatt presents us with a fairy tale modeled on the classic lines of Snow White. A beautiful princess is made ugly on the outside, but underneath the cloaking of her condition, is more beautiful than anyone else—just as Snow White is dressed in rags, her beauty, innocence, and goodness are too pure to be truly disguised. The poem’s subheading, “A True Fable of My Old Kentucky Nurse,” overtly states that the poem is a “fable,” and while explicitly situating the subject, the black princess, as a fairy tale character, she makes a point of claiming that her princess is “such as no dainty pen of gold/Would write of in a fairy book” (ln 3-4). Piatt’s usage

here is ironic as Piatt claims her subject is not fit for a real fairy tale, but she writes one anyway, as if differentiating between suitable subjects and then intentionally and publicly flouting the convention.

Piatt plays with the light and dark dichotomy that is so familiar to us in fairy tales. Even this fairy tale princess becomes fairer through the course of the poem as the narrator of the poem explains, “that at her side the whitest queen/Were dark—her darkness was so fair” (ln 23-24). This princess did not fit the stereotype of white royalty, as neither “Court lace nor jewels had she seen” (ln 21), but the queen that may have been “whitest” in appearance may not have the whitest, cleanest, purest soul. Yet this princess, black on the outside, is “fair”—she is the cleanest of sin. While the phrase “darkness was so fair” may be read as a whitening of the black princess, instead I read it as a conscious shift from the conventional dark and light dichotomy. This is an intentional and subversive use of the common fairy tale convention, in which darkness is associated with sin or badness and whiteness is associated with purity. Piatt makes a point of using both “white” and “fair” in this poem, though in this instance, the terms are not synonymous.

The abundance of magic and fairy tale elements that Piatt paints in this poem serve as points of contrast, offering another critique of the romanticization of the South that unearths the violence and human suffering underneath. The fable introduction, complete with “fairy book[s],” “brooding mystery,” and “painted tale[s],” gives way in the fifth stanza when Piatt asks her reader to step away from the images from fantastic stories. She writes, “Not of the lamp, not of the ring,/The helpless, powerful slave was she;/But of a subtler, fiercer thing--/She was the slave of slavery” (ln 17-20). The ancient genie of the first line of the stanza, something magical and removed from our grasp and

sympathy by time and reality, gives way to a very real and familiar slave woman. The “subtler, fiercer thing” is the more damaging, as it represents the slavery that many would like to ignore and, unlike a fairy tale about a genie, it requires human beings living under conditions that are far from a fairy tale. The subject is no longer charming or romantic, and the beautiful imagery of the poem is now sullied with the clear connotation to reality, a reality that is ugly and unjust.

The only thing that can truly save the black princess from such a fate is death; no magic intervention provides a sweet ending for this fairy tale character, because in fact, she lives in reality. When the princess’ “true knight” comes to rescue her, we find that he is “The Knight of the Pale Horse” (ln 33), a biblical reference to the four horseman of the apocalypse, and the horseman representing death. When he comes to save her, “he laid/His shadowy lance against the spell/That hid her self: as if afraid,/The cruel blackness shrank and fell” (ln 34-36). In a world in which skin color predominates and determines fate, only death can relieve the black princess from the bonds of slavery and prejudice. It is ultimately a very pessimistic view of the capability of humankind to overcome such hate and oppression. Even the Ohio River, the barrier between North and South, freedom and slavery, requires such a “knight,” or more clearly, an endless night, to be truly traversed: “He took her with him through the night,/And swam a river cold and deep,/And vanished up an awful night” (ln 38-40). In this way, Piatt makes clear that it is not only the South that is romanticized and misrepresented, but the North is idealized as well—it is not simply a matter of crossing the river into the Ohio that will make a slave’s life free, and slavery is not the only kind of institutionalized oppression present. Real freedom from the cruelties and suffering of life comes only from the end of one’s time on earth.

Though Piatt draws attention to the cruelty of slavery and prejudice in “The Black Princess,” rather than offer a biting criticism of the South, she troubles the idea of responsibility for slavery. The very poem that laments injustice also asks us to reconsider who exactly is to blame for it. While the princess awaits her rescue, she is “shut/In some vague giant’s tower of air/Built higher than her hope was” (ln 30-31). Who exactly is this “vague giant” and what is his purpose? Piatt avoids naming, and the passive voice used in the poem becomes especially suspect. The tower, “built higher than her hope,” leaves the suggestion of something so massive and overwhelming that one single person, or even perhaps one half of the country alone, could not possibly be responsible for its construction. While acknowledging the injustice of slavery, Piatt also seems to suggest that it was an institution built not entirely by the South, and raises the question of fault without ever attempting to solve the riddle she poses.

The use of fairyland as an ironic indicator of violence, destruction, and injustice extends its reach to Piatt’s Irish poetry as well, notably in “A Night-Scene from the Rock of Cashel, Ireland” which displays such use of fairy tale, romance, and legend. Piatt sets the poem at the famous Cashel Rock, a scene which was, among others, used by writers of the time to display the fantasy of Ireland, and was memorialized as such by other poets, most notably Aubrey de Vere, an Irish poet, in the “The Rock of Cashel” (Klincheloe, 47). Pamela Klincheloe makes a persuasive argument that unlike many of her American and Irish contemporaries, Piatt takes advantage of the romanticized monument as a moment of social realism—one in which the grisly and historic past of Cashel Rock as a site of mass murder during the Cromwellian invasions was ignored. Piatt focuses not on the “Cashel of Kings/As babbling legends fondly call it,” but instead she sets her sight on “certain other things,” an ominous indicator of what is to come (ln

1-2, 3). These “other things” that some chose to ignore are “A woman’s wasted arm, a child’s gold head” that unsuccessfully attempt to seek shelter and life in the shadow of the monument (ln 7). Such victims of famine, hunger, and poverty desperately pursue a meager life, and in response, “The skeleton’s fixed laugh is seen to mock/the cry for bread below” (ln 11-12). Instead, Piatt uses this scene to draw attention not only to the history of violence and injustice that are a critical part of Cashel Rock, but she also provides a critique of the deliberate idealization of such sites via the contrast with the popular travel literature of the time.

Writers from abroad are not the only ones who are asked to interrogate their grasp on reality in “The Night-Scene From the Rock of Cashel, Ireland.” Anyone who has fallen victim to the daydream of pastoral landscape is invited to “look by this blurred moon, if you would know” (ln 4). Piatt then describes a scene of such dehumanizing poverty that the woman and child of the poem “Shrink back into the wind-stirred straw for shame” while the ever present darkness hides the “happier dead” (ln 8, 5). Yet when the dawn breaks, the cold and hungry peasants are contrasted with the “meadows beautiful, knee-deep/In bloom for many a shining mile around,/The undying grass is white with lambs and sheep/And wandering cattle make a pleasant sound” (ln 17-20). The extremes of scenery make a clear statement as to the needlessness of human suffering; in this case, where land is lush and food is abundant, there is no reason for such want to exist. It also clarifies the relationship between the viewer of such scenes and what is actually perceived by those who might see them. While some might see only the “Cashel of Kings,/As babbling legends fondly call it” and the charming, verdant pastoral landscapes, for those that are willing to bother noticing, there is poverty, hunger and death. She calls to her reader, “if you would know,” asking the general

readership to examine their own complicity in the romantic myths of rocky monuments and castles, and uncovers the danger that lies therein.

During the time of the poem's publication in 1889, Ireland had recently experienced both the Great Famine of the 1840s as well as the more recent 1879 famine, and political debates over home rule and absentee landlords were a crucial part of the response to the mass hunger and poverty (Foster, 334). By framing such popular tourist destinations as sites of needless hunger and dehumanizing poverty, the recent history calls to attention not only long-ago injustice, but the very recent memory of the famine and all of the political realities surrounding such poverty and death. Piatt insists on reality at the expense of the mythic Irish fantasy of her contemporaries, and in the process, illuminates the dangers such romanticization as found in fairy tales and legends can be. They obscure reality, as well as injustice and oppression, acting as tools of oppression in turn.

Piatt's stay in Ireland inspired entire books of poetry, most notably *An Enchanted Castle*, and many of these had such scenes of poverty, though it is important to note that despite Piatt's deep sympathy and sense of injustice at the effects of famine and political strife, she hesitates to completely hold any particular cause, people, or class of people at fault. In "An Idyll of the Wayside in Ireland," an impoverished family pulls their meager belongings by "broken cart, themselves had drawn/Along their aimless way" (ln 21-22). With nowhere to go, no money to survive or valuables to sell, they wait with "empty hands" by the "graveyard wall," perhaps an indicator of where they will likely remain (ln 11, 5).

The hungry peasantry that Piatt writes of in this poem is socially and politically silent, without any means of bettering or defending themselves. As the family tries to

make themselves comfortable, the unnamed narrator observes the father figure, “A man whose sins or woes had cut/Deeper than years can reach/Wandered among the hedges, but/Showed us no sign of speech” (ln 13-16). This stanza raises a number of questions: What are his sins, and if he sinned, does that mean that it is his fault his family is starving? That he “wandered among the hedges” suggests that anyone who is not paying attention might easily miss him—he is part of the periphery of the church, a place of religious and social gathering, and he remains there, never venturing into the church that serves as the setting for the poem. Most of all, his silence is the salient feature of these lines. He “showed us no sign of speech,” the precise wording of which suggests that perhaps he cannot speak, or perhaps he has spoken but the viewers did not see the “signs.” Such a characterization implies that he is unable to help himself, not only materially, but also politically and socially. He remains barely noticed and unheard, lingering on the periphery. But who precisely is “us”? The poem has only an unnamed, omnipresent speaker, though “Clommel’s sad church, unroofed, alone,/As sleepy as its dead,/Shivered through every leaf and stone—/For pity? Overhead.” (ln 1-4). Here Piatt raises a question she does not answer. The personified church, empty and falling apart, is the lone audience for this scene of want. It is either immobilized or unseeing, “as sleepy as its dead,” yet it shivers, “For pity?” We do not know. The church is the sole presence besides this family, yet it offers no shelter, and its ‘feelings’ or motives are unknown.

This is not the only question that Piatt leaves unanswered. As the poem progresses, we learn more of the family’s story, and are asked to wonder whose fault it is that this family goes without basic human necessities. We learn that their “cabin’s straw-roof.../Had fallen, and they had turned their feet/From its one wretched room” (ln 25-

28). For want of a one-room, straw-roof hut, the family is exposed to the elements, without shelter or home or means of caring for themselves. Because of one singular, unfortunate event, their situation is reduced from desperately poor to desperately poor and homeless. Despite the devastating backstory, Piatt makes a surprising turn, and the next stanza follows thus: “Yet where the fault? The landlord’s? Mark,/He, too, has wrongs. Ah me,/These things lie deeper in the dark/than eye of man may see!” (ln 29-32). Piatt is of course referring to the landlord system that prevailed in Ireland at the time, including absentee landlords that lived abroad and used their tenant farmers as cheap labor in conditions that were nearly slave-like. For all of the sympathy and interest in the condition of poverty that many lived in, Piatt hesitates to point blame. Instead of holding the landlord accountable for the “one wretched room” that the family no longer has, she skirts the accountability issue, claiming “these things lie deeper in the dark/than eye of man may see!”

In Piatt’s case, “deeper in the dark” is most likely to refer to the social and political determinants that created Ireland’s landlord-tenant system, a system steeped deep in historical conventions of class divisions and legal right. As Bennett notes, Piatt may have felt a sympathy that stemmed from her own place of birth, and others, including William Desmond O’Brien, drew direct parallels between the landowning class in Ireland and the slave-owning class in the South “Like the oligarchy of the Slave States, they inherited legal rights, which, however contrary to the laws on humanity, their education, customs and self-interest taught them to regard as just” (qtd. Bennett, 178). Piatt suggests that we consider the role of wealth and greed in the poverty of the peasantry, but also the roles of custom and law, so without directly blaming or excusing,

Piatt troubles the ideas of clear right and wrong, the gaps between legal and just, and allows for multiple realities to exist without rejecting any of them.

We can trace the same multiplicity of realities, and of subjects as well, in “Pro Patria,” which translates to “For the fatherland.” The speaker of the poem has recently relocated to Ireland, and the opening stanzas mourn the unfamiliarity of a new nightmarish fairyland in which the speaker has just been cast. The speaker is “As some new ghost wrecked on some other world,” as if her uprooting and subsequent transplantation are truly akin to death, while the very descriptions of what the speaker sees are laden with feelings of strangeness and alienation. The nuns are “shadows in black bridal veils, who never/On earth may hope their plighted Lord to see” (ln 9-10), and the monks are equally strange and incomprehensible—“Some sandal-footed, vision-eyed/Sad-hooded monk into your wonder glide” (ln 11-12). Yet in reality, monks and nuns, and Catholicism in general, it might be argued, though somewhat unfamiliar to someone of a Protestant background, are in actuality a different incarnation of the same root system of faith, Christianity, so not wholly strange after all.

This idea of smaller differences cloaking larger similarities runs throughout the poem, and just as the speaker imagines Ireland as a kind of fairyland, she imagines her home as a fairyland as well, missing out on the reality of each as she does so. The fourth stanza makes clear the fantasized aspects of home and Ireland both:

To think, if it be in the dew-dim languor
Of the new year, of peach and apple-blooms
By the Ohio—and to start in anger,
Almost, at glimmerings in the faëry glooms
Where the primroses hide and the young thrush

Makes songs about some old-world daisy's blush.

The speaker begins by focusing on genteel imagery of “dew-dim languor” and the picturesque blooms of fruit trees by the riverside and makes a clashing contrast with the dark and mysterious “faëry glooms” of Ireland. Even the seemingly innocent primroses are not without their ominous connotation to corrupt politicians and British rule, as Primroses were a favorite flower of both Benjamin Disraeli and Queen Victoria. As well, the “young thrush” that “makes songs,” a common motif of nineteenth-century romantic poetry, criticizes of all those poets and literary figures that idealize the Irish landscape and “some old-world daisy's blush” while ignoring the Irish people.

When Piatt turns her fifth stanza to romantic visions of the South, the daydream begins to slide away. It begins with “gorgeous leaves...flying/Through all the mighty woods, where I was born,/To sit in immemorial ruin sighing/To braid the gold hair of the Indian corn” (ln 25-28), and we can see childhood memories become fantasy, the “mighty woods” legendary, and the South a place of “immemorial ruin.” It is idealized and recreated as a place of old, sweet daydreams, and a place of simplicity, where a child can happily “braid the gold hair of the Indian corn.” But the two final lines of the stanza point to a reality that the speaker does not want to acknowledge. In the speaker's memory of herself as a little girl, she plays “with [her] slave-playmates singing, here and there,/Ere they were sold to their new master, Care!” (ln 29-30). While the four first lines may be picturesque, it is difficult for any reader to reflect warmly on children being sold, and the audience is forced to become acutely aware of the difference between the romantic notions of the South and the actuality of the South. Despite the speaker's attempt to remember her home fondly and thereby render it absent of its sad history, it

is tainted with her knowledge that in reality, her home is not a perfect place, and is the site of both good and bad things just as is any other place.

The remainder of the poem draws on the similarities between Ireland and the United States, namely, it traces a theme of injustice and shame that transcends national boundaries and even blurs the two seemingly unlike countries into a single subject. The last three stanzas of the poem read thus:

Yet, if it be the time when things should wither
 In our old places—(oh, my heart, my heart!
Whence comes the evil that blows you whither
 It listeth?)—Walking in a dream, to start
At this immortal greenness, mocking me
Alike from tower and tomb, from grass and tree:

This is to love my country! Oh, the burning
 Of her quick blood at the poor jest, the sneer,
The insolent calm question still, concerning
 Her dress, her manners! “Are you, the, so queer
At home—we mean no harm—as we have heard?”
This is to love my country, on my word.

Ah, so across the gulf they hiss and mutter:
 “Her sins they are as scarlet?” Had they been,
Whiter than wool they’re washed! What of the utter

Love of her million sons who died for sin
Not hers but theirs, who, from their common grave,
Would rise and die again were she to save!

The speaker's sense of the ideal in her old home has "wither[ed]" in "old places," namely her "heart." She recognizes the reality of her home, in its best and worst light, and now that she is in Ireland, she sees in the things she does not like an increasingly clear reflection of her home, an experience almost more surreal than real. She "walk[s] in a dream," and finds that the similarities between "tower," a representative of Ireland, and "tomb," a representative of the South, "mocking me/Alike" in their sameness and in her original impulse to scorn Ireland in preference for her home. She finds that just as the towers that tourists like to visit hide violence and suffering of the poor, the tombs of Southern legends that are so often a part of the romantic vision of the South hide the fact that the South was fighting for a way of life that required the slavery of others. When the speaker laments "This is to love my country!," she refers to the knowledge of one's own sins, or at least those associated with one's self as a representative of a nation, and having to answer for them.

By the final stanza, Piatt has conflated the American South and Ireland, and it is no longer clear which she is referring to. Are the "million sons who died for sin" referring to the Southern boys and men killed during the Civil War, or the millions that died of poverty during Ireland in the nineteenth century, or both? And what of the question posed—"Her sins, are they as scarlet?" What exactly are her sins, and what are they being compared to? Or is the female subject merely a feminized stand-in for a nation, rather than an individual woman? These are questions that Piatt leaves

unanswered, but the blurring of the American South and Ireland makes an intentional comparison between the injustices and the sins of the two places, while leaving open a multitude of possible answers, histories, rights, and wrongs.

Though the relational identity expressed through Piatt's poetry is grounded in a locality, the American South, it is important to note that Piatt's work was well known during her life time and she published in the United States, Ireland, and Great Britain, creating a global audience. Piatt had eighteen of her own titles published, as well as work published in 37 magazines (Bennett, xxviii). In addition to Piatt's own plethora of publication, others were publishing regularly as well, and the entire publishing industry saw a great postbellum boom, increasing from around 700 periodicals alone in the United States at the end of the Civil War in 1865 to 3,300 only twenty years later (Giordano, 34-35). By her frequent international and interregional publication, Piatt is able to transmit her local cultural referent across national borders, interacting with and responding to work by poets and writers otherwise outside of her sphere of influence. In this way, the local cultural referent and relational identities established lose their locality, becoming globally prominent, or at least in Piatt's case, transatlantic.

In Piatt's American Civil War and Irish poems, we can see how the multi-layered localities act as spheres of influence that allow for the inclusion of multiple histories and perspectives that pay no attention to national borders, but rather, human interaction in spite of such borders. Levander comments that recent scholarship in transnationalism is redefining American literary history in a way that "reveals the complex and multiform layers of cultural engagement and opposition that can characterize literary texts and tradition" (450). This kind of interaction is exactly where Piatt's transnationalism lies, situating her as a part of this new American tradition. Just as her poems raise questions

that are not answered, they play with multiplicities of historical and political perspectives, whether in the more transregional sense between the North and the South, or a more transnational sense between historical sites and events remembered differently across the American, Irish and British borders.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Piatt's body of work is that we can trace multiple kinds of transnationalism within it. As transnationalism has gained increasing academic prominence, some, such as Micol Seigel, have turned to examine the use of transnationalism itself, and in doing so, Seigel makes comparisons between the use of transnationalism and comparativism, suggesting that comparativism be used as a subject that fosters the study of connections, rather than a method in and of itself (66). More important to my own case than the superiority of one vein of comparativism over the other, is the suggestion of subject and method, which, when applied to transnationalism, illuminates the multiple ways that transnationalism functions within Piatt's verse. Piatt was quite clearly transnational in subject, as her poems create conceptual links between the interacting, overlapping historical and cultural exchanges in the Southern and Northern United States and Ireland, as well as between them, demonstrating that the way that others conceptualize or colonize a monument, or historical site, or story can create dangerous and impactful consequences across, under, and through boundaries, rendering the nation as a cultural referent for the various social actors on the transatlantic stage. She propagates these ideas in the poems themselves, and through her frequent, wide-spread publication in each of the cultural spheres interacting in her poetry—the American North, the American South, Ireland, and England—Piatt uses a transnational methodology as well, calling upon her audience as the social actors that are represented in her work, spreading her own dynamic

cultural referent across the Atlantic, so the multiple localities involved become globally relevant.

More remarkable than Piatt's transnational influence, is her deeply thoughtful and precise use of genteel poetic tropes to work within limits imposed on her by nineteenth-century expectations. Piatt's work is highly diverse in subject, as well as the degree to which she troubles these expectations, yet even in this range of expression we can see reflected the desire to truthfully and sincerely question established poetic practices, and popular modes of thought concerning social justice issues of the day, many of which plague our highly globalized consciousness even into the Twenty-first Century. By continuing the study of recently recovered poets such as Piatt, we can more critically and comprehensively seek to understand the multivocal nature of cultural and literary representations throughout the nineteenth century.

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