

# THE COST OF STORY

## *Ideology and Ambivalence in the Verse Narratives of E. J. Pratt*

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**T** O SAY THAT THE ESSENTIAL PRATT is the narratives has become almost a truism. As early as 1923 R. S. KNOX, in a *Canadian Forum* review of Newfoundland Verse wrote that "the great things are unquestionably the narratives," a view later adopted by Munroe Beattie for his contribution to the *Literary History of Canada* (255). Similarly, for Northrop Frye, writing in 1946, "Brébeuf and His Brethren" was "not only the greatest but the most complete Canadian narrative" (*The Bush Garden*, 153). According to Susan Gingell's introduction to her 1983 collection, *E. J. Pratt on His Life and Poetry*, Pratt's fame rests on his "genius as a raconteur" (xv), while for biographer David G. Pitt, Pratt is "the product of a mainly oral culture in which the story-telling entertainer-historian was a kind of hero" (163-64). But there is an implicit assumption in such tokens of enthusiasm, namely that with insistence on story Pratt must have been moving in a direction opposite to the main movement of modern literature, where according to Ronald Sukenick the writer "is forced to start from scratch. Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version" (41).

What Sukenick seems to have discovered but nevertheless refused to adopt for himself, is the certainty of a story based upon certainty of cultural values. I will be developing this point later, but let me mention here that in the lost "plot" sanctioned by an "omniscient author" there is involved the psychologically primitive conflict of Good and Evil: an epic hero personifying Good emerges victorious from mortal combat with Evil, however arbitrarily Good and Evil may have been defined. Are we to infer from this that Pratt, in resorting to the tradition of the epic was likewise concerned with the conflict of Good and Evil? If in "Brébeuf" Pratt regards as essential the difference between what "is to do" and what is "not to do," the real subject-matter of the poem, apart from the Jesuits' Huron mission, indeed seems to be the possibility of moral certainty. In any case, Pratt's rediscovery of verse narrative should not be considered merely as a spontaneous event but should be

accounted for in terms of a crisis of our cultural value systems that seems to be reducing moral certainty to an obsolete necessity.

That narrative may be a response to crisis has been noted by Northrop Frye, who relates the re-emergence of verse narrative in Canadian literature to “all the philosophical pessimism and moral nihilism” of the nineteenth century (154). Contrary to those “Earlier Canadian writers [who] were certain of their moral values: right was white, wrong black, and nothing else counted or even existed” (226), by the end of the nineteenth century the social cohesion within the closely knit and beleaguered society of the “garrison” had begun to dissolve. At the same time, there had set in the rediscovery of “the spirit of Anglo-Saxon culture,” in which the poet was still “the voice of the community” (183, 187), in other words, restitution of moral certainty.

What Frye does not mention here is an efficient cause for the crisis of values that had reached the Canadian “garrisons.” For this, let us take into consideration what Marx, commenting on Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, wrote about the effects of money — “[it] converts both human and natural qualities into their respective counterparts . . . truth into untruth, love into hatred, hatred into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, nonsense into reason, reason into nonsense” (301). Assuming, as Marx did, that the crisis of traditional values takes its origins in the marketplace — where the “yellow, glittering, precious gold” becomes the “visible God, that solder’st close impossibilities, and maketh them kiss” (*Timon*, iv.iii) — we can explain the crisis of storytelling envisaged by Sukenick. It is the inversion of everything dear and true (what Nietzsche referred to in terms of a “transvaluation of values”) that ultimately deprives narrative of the deep-structural oppositions which are its animating force.

On the other hand, discourse in which narrative opposition manifests itself in purer form can be described in terms of the semantic functions of good and evil (or other values) constituting the deep-structural opposition of a story within which they are eventually related to a particular set of “actants” (the term is that of A. J. Greimas). In abstract terms, a sender marks the ideological point of reference to ‘instruct’ a subject to search for and find a desired object. To illustrate this point, I will look briefly at the narrative program of orthodox Marxist ideologies: there, History sends humanity on an errand to wrest, with the help of the proletariat, a realm of freedom from the realm of necessity dominated by the opposing bourgeois classes. It is becoming obvious that the absolute certainty of ideologies concerning values accounts for their manichean structure. More importantly, perhaps, on the level of discourse such absolute certainty also accounts for the affinities of ideologies with an Ian Fleming novel, a mythic tale, or a heroic epic.<sup>1</sup>

But dogmatic writing may be overcome by irony and ambivalence. Commenting on Robert Musil’s *Man without Qualities*, P. V. Zima concludes, “A manichéisme

[idéologique] il oppose l'ambivalence et l'ironie qui tendent à discréditer les énoncés dogmatiques" (139). In view of this it is no mere accident that in his first attempt to write long poetry Pratt, rather than using the grave (heroic) style of the later and highly serious "Brébeuf," has employed the riotous incongruities of comic epic. "The Witches' Brew" (1925) is about the agreement of three witches to make all the fishes drunk. To this purpose a most powerful brew is concocted, which, apart from seafoods and some rather strange delicacies like "Corn beef, molasses, chamois milk, / Cotton, Irish linen, silk, / Pickles, dynamite and jam," contains practically all the different brands of liquor to be found on the Canadian black market of the 1920's (121-22).<sup>2</sup>

In order to protect the brew, the smell of which attracts not only the fish and other creatures but also the shades from Hades, the witches hire Tom, a monstrous sea-cat from Zanzibar. But in consequence of his partaking from the brew, Tom becomes oblivious to the differences between friend and foe, eventually making onslaught upon his own kin and kindred. With Tom's indiscriminate slaughter ending in "a lonely / Voyage of immortal raids / And epic plunder" (136), much of the poem seems an ironic statement concerning the idea of the epic hero, who is always faithful to his code of honour and who must therefore engage in mortal combat with Evil. If Tom's fight is but a caricature of the epic struggle, such ambivalence is also part of a much grander framework in which finally all certainties dissolve: all the dead, including the visible saints, have been relegated to Hades, while the feast of drunkenness, far from appearing sinful, is a prelude to paradisiacal bliss. By dint of this almost carnivalesque transvaluation of values even the fish is stripped of its Christian symbolism. Following only the laws of nature, the fish are without a moral code: "As Nature had at the beginning / created them, so they remained — / Fish with cold blood no skill had trained / To the warm arts of human sinning" (128).

The tone of comic epic in "The Witches' Brew" may well have served as a spur to the sensibilities of the reader toward the crisis of cultural values. But it is in the documentaries that Pratt seems to have probed most deeply the possibilities of moral certainty. If in these poems Pratt draws upon situations which allow for heroic action, ultimately for the poet as much as for his characters the quest for unambiguous values upon which to base moral choice seems to have resulted in ambiguity. I have already mentioned that the old myth of the conflict of good and evil is also involved in ideology. I hope that no one assumes that, as a result of the struggle against dogma, story in "Towards the Last Spike" is actually dead or about to die. But the end of the poem — always the most important part for Pratt, as he insisted invariably (see Gingell, 18, 47, 48, 60) — is peculiarly doubled: what the narrator would like to see as the epic achievement of "the breed [which] had triumphed after all," in the eyes of Van Horne has dwindled to the proportions of "a job . . . well done" (387-88). Pratt seems to have given free reign here to irony

and ambivalence, with the fact that the gain from a job that is well done is most certainly pecuniary suggesting that the marketplace be seen together with a crisis of cultural values as much as with a crisis of narrative. At the same time, the marketplace relates not only to the increasing fragmentation and discontinuity of modern narratives but also to dogmatic fabrication, which is but the ideologue's reaction to crisis.

If such is my thesis, it would have to be substantiated by an analysis of the bulk of Pratt's writings, a task which is beyond the scope of this essay. What I hope to achieve here is, by dealing with a few representative examples of Pratt's oeuvre to present enough evidence to stimulate the option of looking at Pratt in a fresh light.<sup>3</sup> Although I will refer to a variety of Pratt's poems as well as to some of his commentaries, my subject-matter will be limited to "The Titanic," "Brébeuf and His Brethren," and "Towards the Last Spike." Not only are these poems comparable in form (unlike the "extravaganzas," for which Pratt used the ballad meter, they are written in pentameter lines), but they are also the ones generally held in highest esteem. And since ironically the *Collected Poems* of one of Canada's "leading poets" (Frye, 10) have long been out of print, they are the ones most easily accessible at least in part in anthologies, such as Margaret Atwood's *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*.

To begin, then, with "The Titanic," for Pratt modern life provides just as many opportunities for heroic action as does the world of our ancestors. This is suggested by his linking past and present through invoking "That ancient *hubris* in the dreams of men, / Which would have slain the cattle of the sun, / And filched the lightning from the first of Zeus" (213). But not only is the restoration of traditional loyalties a matter of a time out — of the period following the collision with the iceberg. Defining heroic actions as "deeds . . . where there is no commercial equation" (Gingell, 17-18), Pratt seems only too aware that the place for modern heroics is not just outside the quotidian but outside the realm informed by money. What is central to the story of "The Titanic," therefore, is not only certainty of values; equally important is the fragmentation of the modern world into the sub-systems of power, money, and culture.

In a comment on "The Titanic" Pratt notes that one of his aims was to show the many ironies that had accompanied the disaster, such as the semblance of the historical chronology to "some power with intelligence and resource [having] organized and directed a conspiracy" (Gingell, 95). To be sure, directed against a ship which was "An ocean lifeboat in herself" and which was the visible expression of the "dreams of builder or of navigator" (212). But the ship had been ordered not only to the greater glory of the builders. Not the least reason for the *Titanic's* being built was to bring home her share of a highly competitive market: "The Primate of the Lines, she had out-classed / That rival effort to eliminate her / Beyond the North Sea" (212). What is more, the blatant illogicality of her being

“The perfect ship at last — the first unsinkable, / Proved in advance,” turns out to be a sales device: “had not the folders read so?” (212).

It is only if we take into consideration the pecuniary motifs behind the building of the *Titanic* that Pratt’s elaborate image of the poker game makes full sense as a microcosm of the whole enterprise. What is at stake, with the ship as much as with the card game, is money — risk capital. Not unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the moralizing only thinly disguises the protagonist’s risky business ventures, the story of “The Titanic” is about the world of money. The poem, written only a few years after the crash of the New York stock exchange, introduces a note of secularity that is much less prominent in the companion poem by Thomas Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain: Lines on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”<sup>4</sup>

Taking stock of the characters in Pratt’s gambling scheme, a good many of them belong to what Veblen called the “leisure class.” Among the “Thousands of feet . . . taking overhead / The fourth lap round the deck to make the mile” (216), there are the members of the poker party (Jones, Larry, Van Raalte, MacRae, Cripps, Harry), as well as the “Grey-templed Caesars of the world’s Exchange / [who] Swallowed liqueurs and coffee as they sat / Under the Georgian carved mahogany, / Dictating wireless hieroglyphics that / Would on the opening of the Board Rooms rock / The pillared dollars of a railroad stock” (217). The unconcern of these high priests toward those not of their class (perspective is that of an observer [222]) is later reflected in their behaviour on deck — “silhouettes / Of men in dinner jackets staging an act / In which delusion passed, deriding fact / Behind the cupped flare of the cigarettes” (223).

This abstract approach to the world by those who are lulled by “the security / Of wealth” (223) also pertains to the officers and the crew, who “Might just as well have stopped ashore” as the ship “is run / By gadgets from the bridge” (223). The “risk at Lloyd’s remained a record low” (213) precisely because the human factor has been made redundant: “Even the judgment stood in little need / Of reason, for the Watch had but to read / Levels and lights, meter or card or bell” (218). Both the leisure class and the technicians are representatives of a new order, within which reason is believed to have “driven out all phantoms which the mind / Had loosed from ocean closets, and assigned / To the dry earth the custody of fears” (216-17).

Ironically, however, those fears have in fact “Stalked with her down the tallow of the slips” (212). During the ship’s maiden trip, “Old sailors of the clipper decades, wise / To the sea’s incantations, muttered fables / About careening vessels with their cables / Snapped in their harbours under peaceful skies” (214). With “those sailors, wise and old” being but vestiges of an older order, Pratt seems to be saying both that this old order, however desirable it may have been,<sup>5</sup> is rapidly giving way to a new order, and that the stories “Of portents hidden in the natal hour . . .” (215) are truer than the ones being told now because with the old order

there still was certainty of values. Equally important, perhaps, is that in the end the old order is at least partly restored. From the issuing of the command "Women and children first!" (231) to the liner's "thousand fathoms journey to her grave" (242), there is epiphany after epiphany of human courage, endurance, and self-sacrifice. Even when "self-preservation fought / Its red primordial struggle with the 'ought'" (241), this is possible only because there is certainty of what is good and what is not.

But the old order is restored only in the face of imminent disaster. What is restored is at best a simulacrum (a "spell" [239]) of traditional loyalties, bound to go down with the ship. The transitory quality of the manifest heroism (hence its semantic ambiguity) is perhaps best expressed through its association with the poker game — "those high moments when the gambler tossed / Upon the chance and uncomplaining lost" (241). And neither should we overlook the ambiguity of the word "redeem": the decision of the captain of the *Carpathia* to steam up, in spite of the ice, to eighteen knots is described as one "to redeem / Errors of brain by hazards of the heart" (235). The religious and, on the other hand, economic overtones of the word "redeem" (if used in the sense of, 1. to make atonement for and, 2. to recover mortgaged property by payment of the amount due) are symbolic of the degradation of the certainty of values sought for by the laws of the marketplace. Moreover, traditional loyalties are not to be recovered through the "spell" of a new heroism. This is, I believe, why the poem ends upon one of the most terrifying images of indifference in modern literature, which owes much of its effectiveness to the obvious personification of the berg:

And out there in the starlight, with no trace  
 Upon it of its deed but the last wave  
 From the *Titanic* fretting at its base,  
 Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods,  
 The grey shape with the palaeolithic face  
 Was still the master of the longitudes. (242)

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 N "THE TITANIC," NATURE IS CLEARLY SYMBOLIC of a crisis of cultural values, which can be recovered only in extreme situations. This is true also of "Brébeuf and His Brethren." Unlike in "The Titanic," however, where there is transition from the secular world to the realm of heroic doom, in "Brébeuf" the stage for heroism is set from the very beginning. Moreover, the recovered loyalties do not perish with the priests since the present is called upon to understand and appreciate the past. As we are told in the epilogue, "the winds of God / Which blew over France are blowing once more through the pines . . . And the ashes of St. Ignace are glowing afresh" (297). This and the fact that the realms of power

and money are virtually excluded from the story, render the sense of crisis more urgent here than in "The Titanic."

Characterization reveals to what extent Brébeuf's heroic stature serves as an alternative to a crisis of cultural values. For once, there is his noble birth: "The family name was known to chivalry" (246). As his ancestors, so is our hero engaged in the conflict of good and evil, "reshaping for the world his *City of God*" (244). On a symbolic level, the present, too, is felt to be in need of yet another "Crusades" (298). The plight of the present is also foregrounded by Pratt's emphasis on Brébeuf being heir to Norman nobility, making him the spiritual ancestor not only of French-Canadians (for whom the ill-fated Jesuit mission of the Hurons between 1629 and 1649 had always been written in capital letters in their *Annales*) but also of English-Canadians, hence a truly national hero.

In keeping with the task that is truly beyond the merely human, there is mention of Brébeuf's "massive stature, courage never questioned, / His steady glance, the firmness of his voice, / And that strange nimbus of authority" (271). Brébeuf's physical strength (in a footnote to the poem Pratt explains that the name given to Brébeuf by the Indians, Echon, means "he who pulls the heavy loads" [255]) is surpassed only by his endurance during his martyrdom, which he undergoes like "a lion at bay, not a lamb at the altar" (299). In order for Brébeuf to be convincing as the hero to plant the "martyr's seed" (297), Pratt has liberally drawn upon the conventions of the serious epic. If the division into twelve parts has overtones which are Homeric, "Brébeuf" is also the one among Pratt's longer poems the action of which follows most closely the pattern of the heroic quest. Sent upon an errand into the wilderness by his superiors, the hero is first separated from his society of the monastery at Bayeux. In the course of dangerous journeys he is then initiated into the fields of moral indifference ("On which the yield would be the Huron nation / Baptized and dedicated to the Faith" [255]). In what here resembles the beatification of Roman Catholic rites, he is finally elevated to the status of a martyr or religious hero. If "the source / Of His strength, the home of his courage" was in "the sound of invisible trumpets blowing / Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered / By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill" (296), he was certainly well equipped for the crucial struggle.

I do not doubt that for Pratt the cross was indeed a symbol of the necessity of Christian values *vis-à-vis* a moral wilderness,<sup>6</sup> and that Brébeuf can be understood as the agent of divine will, pledging himself "never to fail thee in the grace / Of martyrdom, if by thy mercy, Thou / Dost offer it to me" (265). But Brébeuf's actions are also shown to be informed by the Society of Jesus, a vast network of religious zealots braced by a Christian ideology founded by Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier in 1534. "The winds of God were blowing over France" at a time when the Christian faith had lost its universal authority and had been reduced to a partial system. Hence the Counterreformation appears in terms of a battle be-

tween two Christian ideologies, each reflecting the interests of a particular social group. However authentic the faith of Loyola and Xavier may have been, at the hands of the Church political (the order of S.J. was formally approved by Pope Paul III in 1540) their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience were turned into ideological weapons in the struggle for an endangered value system.

If it is true that, as Louis Althusser once said, ideology calls upon individuals to become subjects,<sup>7</sup> this is precisely what is happening in the opening lines of the poem: "The winds of God," we are told, were "Kindling the hearts and altars, changing vows / Of rote into an alphabet of flame" (244). It is ideology as much as genuine belief which makes Brébeuf say with assurance the words, "This is / To do, this not to do" (246).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the letters Brébeuf sends back to France are meant to call upon other individuals to become subjects — to "galvanize" (253) them to the extent that "Their names would rise from their oblivion / To flame on an eternal Calendar" (264).

Much has been written about Pratt's use of the thirty-volume *Jesuit Relations* as a source of the poem.<sup>9</sup> Faithful as Pratt seems to have been to the facts, he chose to include but little concerning the entanglement of the Jesuit mission with the economic interests of the fur trade. There is brief mention in the poem of a "trade and tribal feud long-blown / Between the Hurons and the Allumettes" (253). But the purpose of the passage is essentially to retard the action somewhat. Thus it does not make much of the historical irony that it was the contacts, animated by trade and power politics, between the whites and the Indians which eventually brought about the fall of the Jesuit missions. Pratt's highly selective use of historical material (which has not been noted yet except by Konrad Gross)<sup>10</sup> relates to the realms both of power (to the short-lived dream of "New France expanding till the longitudes / Staggered the daring of the navigators" [285]) and of money (since Fort Sainte Marie "Was ratified by Richelieu who saw Commerce and exploration pushing west" [268]). If Pratt did not make much of either Richelieu or the fur trade, this may have been in the face of the threat to traditional values from the realms of power and money. The missionaries' "different empire" (285) may well be the expression of Pratt's defensiveness concerning traditional loyalties, much as Brébeuf's character is "The token of a nobler chivalry" (282).

Eventually, however, the hopes of the Jesuits' converting the Hurons are as unfulfilled as the hope that the mission's outpost on Lake Superior become "the western gateway to Cathay" (285). The spreading fire, which from the beginning had set the tone of missionary zeal, in the end consumes not only the missions but also the bodies of Brébeuf and his companions. On the one hand the ambivalence of the image reflects the ambivalence of all values (even Brébeuf's fellow priests are as much his "brethren" as the Indians). But it also reflects the ambivalence of all efforts, religious zeal included, to preserve certainty of values against the influence of the marketplace. The priests' mission does not fail because they had,



however unwittingly, been doing the dirty work for the politicians and the merchants but because it had been carrying the spark of its destruction from the time the missionaries had begun to follow “the footsteps of their patrons” (245).

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N “TOWARDS THE LAST SPIKE” Pratt also brings together past and present (“It was the same world then as now”), insisting that, for whatever changes there are in the material world, “blood kept its ancient colour” (346). We are also told that then as now people are moved by ideas or, since ideas are parts of systems of values, ideologies: “Men spoke of acres then and miles and masses, / . . . The east-west cousinship, a nation’s rise, / Hail of identity, a world expanding. / If not the universe: the feel of it / Was in the air — ‘*Union required the Line*’” (346). This sets the tone for a struggle which is hardly one between man and nature (although that is there too), but between actions informed by ideas (“the patriot touch, / The Flag, the magnetism of explorers, / The national unity” [351]) and actions ultimately informed by the marketplace (the “authority from wallets” [347]).

Unlike ideology, which calls upon individuals to become subjects, the laws of the marketplace are indifferent to heroic mottoes like Macdonald’s “From sea to sea” (351). The “sweet silver jingle [in the railroad magnates’] minds” (356) will be heard irrespective of whatever values may be informing the heroes’ actions. This is why it was so difficult for Pratt to sustain poetic conflict. Macdonald is not struggling against a vision equally powerful as his own. Rather, he is struggling against the absence of vision. Blake’s statement in parliament, “*To build a Road over that sea of mountains*” is “pagan” (360) in the sense of its not being informed by a value-system that would oppose Macdonald’s. In fact, had a profit been expected (rather than the prospect of sinking “Those added millions down that wallowing hole” [382]), there would have been no conflict at all and, consequently, no story.

The problematic state of story in “Towards the Last Spike” has been noted by a good many critics. To Munroe Beattie what is absent from the poem are the two chief virtues of the earlier narratives, “a closely knit continuum of motive and action, and a systematic exposition of the process by which a task is carried out” (260). Similarly, for Milton Wilson the poem “assumes the story rather than narrates it” (50), because unless one is a Canadian or has a pretty good knowledge of Canadian history it is virtually impossible to see it as narrative. If the poem does read like a series of snapshots against an historical backdrop, neither critic gives an explanation for this — to Beattie it is simply an “anomaly” (261), while Wilson expresses his bewilderment at the “discontinuity” of what is not epic but only “Verse-Panorama” (as reads the subtitle appearing in the original edition of 1952

[Gingell, 145]). But is not the very contradiction of the textual surface with the 'comic' plot of the narrative (using the term 'comic' in its Frygean sense of referring to a successfully accomplished human act) an expression of Pratt's sense of a crisis of values?

No less problematic than the story is the concept of the hero. Sir John A. Macdonald's moral integrity may be unquestionable, but in the end he is virtually nonexistent as a person. Not part of the last scene of the drama, he is but laboriously retrieved by the narrator promising that the motto, "From sea to sea," would henceforth "Pour through two oceanic megaphones — / Three thousand miles of Hail from port to port" (388). As to Macdonald's helpers (or *adjuvants*), they follow the comic exaggerations of the tall-tale rather, having been pushed upon the scene by the grotesque conceit of the nutritional effects of oatmeal upon Scots ("Out of such chemistry run through by genes, / The food released its fearsome racial products" [348]). The dragon, which in heroic epic is the *opposant* to be overcome by the hero in pitched battle, has lent its shape to the Laurentian Shield. This and the fact that this dragon is but a somnolent one ("asleep or dead . . . too old for death, too old for life" [369]) suggests that finally for Pratt, genuine epic is no longer feasible. As Northrop Frye remarked, "The poem is in the epic tradition without any of the advantages of epic to sustain it."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the accomplishment of the final act of the building of the trans-continental railroad is a climax only technically; "imaginatively," to cite Frye again, it is "an anti-climax" (12). There is but one spike to drive in after the thousands that have preceded it — an iron one, to be sure, and neither are there "flags or bands [to announce] this ceremony" (386). The spike is fumbled, though, and what little elation there may have been, "It ended when Van Horne spat out some phlegm / To ratify the tumult with '*Well Done*' / Tied in a knot of monosyllables" (388). At this point the real, imaginative triumph has already taken place in the Montreal board room of the Canadian Pacific Railway. When the cable pledge arrives from London, the story climaxes in the triumph over all the tight-fisted bankers, over the "treasury at home" as much as over the "purse-strings of the Londoners, / As hard to loosen as salt-water knots" (372). Thus for Macdonald the real antagonist is indifference to his vision effected by money. If Macdonald is indeed paired with Blake, as Catherine M. Pfaff concludes from a note Pratt wrote in the margin of an early draft of the poem (61), the dichotomies they are the representatives of (like vision versus logic, close argument versus magic phrases or metaphors, or the ascetic, the plain, the home-grown versus the luxurious, the romantic, the foreign) are also evidence to Pratt's own struggle toward a plausible set of *actants* when faced with narrative discontinuity, fragmentation, and loss of identity: "As individuals / The men lost their identity; as groups, / As gangs, they massed, divided, subdivided, / Like numerals only" (368).

The “numerals” which are about to replace the individual are symbolic of the crisis of values as much as of the words denoting them. This is why Pratt spends so much time showing how the length of Blake’s speech against Macdonald eventually backfires in the latter’s favour. Here (as in the poem “The New Organon 1937 A.D.”) Pratt lashes out against the corruptions of language — in particular that of the politicians, with its tendency toward formalization and appeasement, its hedging ‘ifs’ and its obfuscating ‘wherefores.’ If language (or speech) is a central aspect to the poem,<sup>12</sup> Pratt’s response to a situation in which words no longer mean what they say is not a simple one. On the one hand, there is Macdonald, who against an encroaching crisis (his “stock of stories had run out” [382]) remarks upon the struggle for those “paltry millions” which “stood between completion of the Road / And bankruptcy of both Road and Nation” (383). This is clearly a struggle in which a nationalist ideology is the ethical stimulus to the “moulding of men’s minds” (358). On the other hand, there is the anti-climactic resolution around the virtually speechless Van Horne. Thus Pratt may indeed have become aware that both the actions informed by a vision and those informed by a political ideology can make for a “battle of ideas and words” (358). In other words, he may have realized that with the kind of history we have to live with the crisis of values is not to be compensated for by a simple return to traditional loyalties, say, of the “Old Organon of 1225 A.D.,” when “there was no sophistry between the subject and the verb; / For what the Khan said, he meant” (74).

THIS ESSAY IS NOT AN ATTEMPT to establish Pratt as a radical writer. Apart from a few angry notes during the thirties (which survived in “The Fable of the Goats” or in “Still Life”) Pratt’s awareness of social pressures was always of a different kind — liberal, humanitarian, Christian. It was from such a perspective that he chose to observe the effects of the marketplace upon traditional values. Thus his rediscovery of verse narrative is neither spontaneous nor particularly Canadian. Like other attempts to create worlds of significant action it marks a reaction to the general degradation of values. But more often than not the recovery of moral certainty may involve but the certainty of ideology. As the chronology of the great narratives reveals, this is an attitude which Pratt the man, admiring the “loyalty to a tradition” of his native ‘Newfies’ (Gingell, 10) as much as Morris’s utopian vision of a Christian-socialist commonwealth in *News from Nowhere* (Pitt, 356), might adopt. To Pratt the poet, however, this was no longer a possibility.<sup>13</sup>

If it is in the technical problems rather than in the choice of subject-matter that the claim to modernity of Pratt’s poetic vision lies, F. Birbalsingh is right in saying that the “tension of [Pratt’s] time” results in “ambivalence or incoherence” (75,

77). However, he is hardly right to chastise Pratt for avoiding “intellectual coherence [which alone] ensures structural unity and ultimately artistic success” (79). As I hope to have shown here, for the modern writer to represent a coherent world is illusionistic or, as another later poem, “Myth and Fact,” puts it, “make-believe [furnishing] to the mind / Asylum in the foliage. / Draw down the blinds and lock the doors tonight: / We would be safe from that which hovers / Above the eaves” (113). The dualisms of such “make-believe” are also involved in the dualisms of ideology (what Zima describes as “les énoncés dogmatiques”), which in turn may be opposed (discredited) by irony and ambivalence. Thus the very ambiguities of the poems analyzed here establish Pratt as an artist constantly moving between the attitudes and assumptions of Victorian Canada and the complexities of modernity. If Pratt the man is not always aware of the vicissitudes of being a modern writer, there are still the poems which, as Theodor W. Adorno once remarked, may be redeemed by the surfacing of that which ideology would deny — “Kunstwerke jedoch haben ihre Grösse einzig daran, dass sie sprechen lassen, was die Ideologie verbirgt” (51).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Le Texte de roman* (Paris: Mouton, 1979), 58: “L’épopée s’organisait plutôt sur la fonction symbolique de la disjonction.” Cf. also Pierre V. Zima, *Manuel de sociocritique* (Paris: Picard, 1985), 118-25.
- <sup>2</sup> All references to Pratt’s poems here are to the *Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt*, 2nd ed., ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).
- <sup>3</sup> One might also say, with some justification, “to look at Pratt in a light that may have been glimpsed by John Sutherland in 1956 but has somehow failed to attract much attention.” Analyzing “The Titanic,” “The Cachalot,” and “The Great Feud,” Sutherland has suggested that while Pratt’s vision may well be “heroic,” we cannot use that word unless we remember that there is also irony and humour to qualify it. I have not used Sutherland more here as this essay is not trying so much to resolve the paradoxes in Pratt’s poetry by positing some hidden Christian mysticism as to discuss the question of what has kept Pratt’s “Christianity” (or, in more general terms, traditional loyalties) below the surface.
- <sup>4</sup> Sandra Djwa notes that in order to give to the tragedy of the poem the sense of a secular (rather than a metaphysical) gamble, Pratt blew up the incident of the poker game at the expense of the story of a hymn service held by the Rev. Mr. Carter, which he had also found in the source he used. Significantly, in the original account by Lawrence Beesley, one of the survivors, the service is linked with the endurance of passengers quietly facing their death. Cf. *E. J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision* (Vancouver: Copp Clark, 1974), 81.
- <sup>5</sup> We know that Pratt, although once an enthusiastic follower of empirical psychology, became increasingly skeptical about science and technology; see David Pitt, *E. J. Pratt: The Truant Years* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), 119-20, 146-51. Similarly, in the poem “From Stone to Steel,” Pratt exhorts us to “Let Java or Geneva be,” for “The path lies through Gethsemane” (*Collected Poems*, 41).
- <sup>6</sup> There are at least two more instances of Pratt’s juxtaposing the cross and moral wilderness: 1. when in “The Roosevelt and the Antioch” (1930) the priest invokes

- "The pale heroic suasion of the rood" upon pronouncing the final absolution for two drowned seamen (199); and 2. when the truant stands up in defiance against the purely mechanical power of the Great Panjandrum, swearing that, "No! by the rood, we will not join your ballet" (105).
- <sup>7</sup> Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat," *La Pensée*, 151 (1970), 36: "L'individu est interpellé en sujet (libre) pour qu'il se soumette librement aux ordres du Sujet, donc pour qu'il accepte (librement) son assujettissement."
- <sup>8</sup> It is probably this paradox which allows for widely opposing views of Pratt's 'Christianity.' For Peter Hunt "Brébeuf and His Brethren" is a celebration of an orthodox religious vision. See "E. J. Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren* — The Critics and the Sources," in Glenn Clever, ed., *The E. J. Pratt Symposium* (Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa Press, 1977), 69-89. At the other end of the interpretive spectrum Vincent Sharman argues that both the hero's ideal and his social context "deny the humanity of men." Vincent Sharman, "Illusion and Atonement: E. J. Pratt and Christianity," *Canadian Literature* 19 (Winter 1964), 27. My own view is perhaps closer to James F. Johnson, who also insists on the "ambiguity" of the poem: "*Brébeuf and His Brethren* and *Towards the Last Spike*: The Two Halves of Pratt's National Epic," *ECW*, 29 (1984), 146. For a general discussion of Pratt's qualified 'Christianity' see John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1956).
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Peter Hunt, 69-89.
- <sup>10</sup> Konrad Gross, "Das Verhältnis von Evolutionstheorie und Geschichtsverständnis im Dokumentargedicht E. J. Pratts," in Dieter Meindl, ed., *Zur Literatur und Kultur Kanadas* (Erlangen, F.R.G.: Palm & Enke, 1984), 67-84.
- <sup>11</sup> Frye, *The Bush Garden*, 11. Cf. Dorothy Livesay's comment that much of what has been somewhat loosely termed 'narartive' in Canadian verse is "neither epic nor narrative." Dorothy Livesay, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre [1969]," in Eli Mandel, ed., *Contexts of Canadian Criticism* (Toronto and Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), 267.
- <sup>12</sup> I am indebted here to Peter Stevens, "Language and Man in the Poetry of E. J. Pratt," in Glenn Clever, ed., *The E. J. Pratt Symposium*, 33-42.
- <sup>13</sup> In an address "On Publishing" (1925/26?) Pratt deliberates on the question of whether one may produce poetry out of propaganda, saying, "I suppose propaganda might be construed on such high and comprehensive grounds that poetry could issue from it, but generally I think that where the intention is so stated at the beginning, the propaganda becomes lost in the poetic construction" (Gingell, 29).

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