

JAVA TO GENEVA

The Making of a Pratt Poem

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THE EVOLUTION OF EXPRESSION is just one of the meanings underlying the highly suggestive phrase “from Java to Geneva” in the Pratt lyric “From Stone to Steel,” but it is this aspect of the phrase that metaphorically evokes E. J. Pratt’s whole creative process from the first primitive stammerings of an idea to its articulate expression in a finished poem. What we have known of this creative method goes very little beyond such a metaphorical analogue, as our knowledge has generally been limited to comments Pratt made in interviews, such as these from a conversation with the CBC’s Jed Adams:

... an idea comes to your mind and it’s nebulous at first and it takes shape by continuous reflection on it. And always in my mind is the importance of having the ending right. That’s the reason why I write the end first. . . . I gradually weave my way back to the beginning, rather than from the beginning to the end. I find that’s more satisfying because I have a terrible fear of anti-climax.¹

By studying all the materials we have available to us on one given poem, we can find out a great deal more about Pratt’s working practices from the conception of that nebulous idea to its polished expression in a finished poem. The writing of “The Truant” provides an ideal example for such an examination, as it was unencumbered by the problems of working with vast amounts of factual research, and because it reflects in miniature Pratt’s usual method of proceeding from idea through research, drafts, excision, expansion and revision to the final form of a poem. Yet it should be conceded that the creation of “The Truant” is not entirely typical of Pratt’s writing process, for the poem is dramatic rather than lyrical or narrative, the two types of verse most commonly associated with Pratt, and thus required not only different materials, but also a slightly different handling. However, its creation is representative enough to illustrate the most characteristic habits of his writing process, and after examining the creation of “The Truant” I shall turn to a study of the additional complicating factors and working practices exhibited in the writing of Pratt’s narrative verse.

In a letter to A. J. M. Smith dated July 13, Pratt’s friend and colleague at the University of Toronto, Ernest Sirluck, described the immediate circumstances in which “The Truant” took shape:

Ned Pratt has been closeted with himself on the second floor of Vic since the end of term; he’s working on a poem about which he’s unusually close-mouthed. All

he'll say is that it's concerned with the relation of human nature to power. I've never seen him so serious.²

This brief statement can help us begin to reconstruct the way in which Pratt worked and furthermore identifies the environment in which so much of his poetry was written. There is the reminder that only in the holiday period when he was free from the demands of lecturing and marking papers for Victoria College³ could he settle down to write his verse. But the compensating advantages of his position at the University are also made evident in an indirect fashion. A private place to work, colleagues with whom he could discuss his writing and on whom he could call for specialized information for the documentary narratives, and the security of a guaranteed income, however small, helped to offset the immense demands on his time and energy.

The specific information that Sirluck's comments provide about the writing of "The Truant" also commands attention. The concentrated effort and seriousness with which Pratt undertook the whole endeavour suggests that, although Pratt intended the poem to be fun, he also had an important personal statement to make. "The Truant" was written under the shadow of the Second World War so that it bears the defiant stamp of battles waged against great odds which are definitive for Pratt of heroic conduct. It is the archetypal conflict of the individual against overwhelming and oppressive power that stands behind the extravagance of the Panjandrum's accusations and curses, and the effrontery of the little genus *homo*.

While Sirluck's observations contribute knowledge about the external circumstances in which "The Truant" took shape, for detailed information about how the poem was actually written, what literary influences it was subject to, and what it meant to Pratt, we must turn to other sources. Among these is a description of the poem prepared by Pratt for a reading given in the Victoria College Library in March 1956:

This is a poem called "The Truant" representing man as talking back to a totalitarian God of power divorced from human considerations of kindness, equity and justice tempered by mercy. He is called here the great Panjandrum, a silly nonsensical term like the Lord High Executioner, knowing he can crush the human species physically by his overwhelming might. Hence the language he uses is formal, erudite and in accordance with a Gilbert and Sullivan court etiquette, and I am afraid able to vex his cousin. The theme is a conflict between the human will and an arbitrary oppression. Some of the words used in this poem I didn't know myself until I began searching for scientific terms in the unabridged dictionaries.⁴

Pratt points here to several influences on the poem which we should briefly consider. If the seventeenth-century court masque lends structure and character to the poem, it is the court masque as seen through the gay nineteenth-century eyes of Gilbert and Sullivan. It is from an eighteenth-century nonsense story by Samuel

Foote⁵ that the title "Panjandrum" comes, but the evolved meanings of the word contain an ambiguity which Pratt built into his portrait. The *O.E.D.* defines "panjandrum" as "a mock title for *an imaginary or mysterious personage of much power, or a personage of great pretension* [my emphasis]; a self-constituted high mightiness or magnifico; a local magnate or official of grand airs; a pompous pretender." By design, the poem does not answer the questions of whether the Panjandrum is a mysterious, or just an imaginary character, of whether he is a personage of much power, or simply one of great pretensions.

Sandra Djwa⁶ has demonstrated that the truant is revolting against a stoically-conceived cosmic power, yet conflict of the human will with an overwhelming mechanistic power is not only a standard theme of Pratt's, it is at least as old as Blake, as Northrop Frye has pointed out. After listening to Pratt read his new poem, Frye wrote this account for A. J. M. Smith:

Ned has just read us his best poem yet, I think, called "The Truant." It's Blake's conflict of Orc and Urizen, the Prometheus-Jesus agent of humanity revolting against the God of universal machinery.⁷

In view of Pratt's close association with Frye at the time when the latter was absorbed in his Blake studies, the possibility of the poet having this particular instance of an archetypal conflict in mind when he wrote "The Truant" is not to be discounted out of hand. A comprehensive study of such sources and analogues for the poem would make a valuable addition to Pratt criticism, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

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PRATT'S SEARCH FOR SCIENTIFIC or specialized terms in the unabridged dictionaries is evidenced in several places in the manuscripts where words such as "troglydote," "coprolite" and "thaumaturge" appear in the margins. Some were worked into the poem; others never found their place. Similarly, lists of rhyming words jotted down in the margins, a characteristic feature of all Pratt verse manuscripts, contain some material the poet was able to use and some that had to be discarded. For example, from the list "black," "egomaniac," "track," "back," "bric a brac" and "claque" only the first (at l. 53 of the final version of the poem), second (at l. 55) and fourth (at l. 61) found a permanent place as rhyming words in the poem. The manuscripts of "The Truant" written in pencil in two battered notebooks (Box 4, no. 30 and 33) and four typescripts which I shall refer to as typescripts one, one A (a carbon copy of the typescript one with pencil emendations in Pratt's hand), two and three, have been preserved in the E. J. Pratt Collection of the Victoria College Library, University of Toronto.

These drafts indicate that the poet's usual practice of beginning by writing the end of the poem first and then working his way backwards was not observed in

the creation of "The Truant." The first fragmentary lines Pratt wrote for the poem were part of the Panjandrum's recitation of the truant's ancestral history and his threatened punishment:

I found you in the primal slime — the protozoa
 And though you've grown I've modelled you
 You have become arrogant, a little dot speck mote
 Six feet tall and two feet wide
 I'll take you at the end intoxicate your cells cancel
 Put arthritis in your joints I'll dim your eyes deafen your ears⁸

What followed were preliminary versions of the truant's reply, insinuating that man had in fact created God.

There is considerable evidence in the manuscripts that "The Truant" grew out of another poem, the little lyric "Out of Step" from *Many Moods* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932), for this title stands at the top of the second page of the earliest drafts and re-appears twice at later stages in the working papers. No doubt drawing on the age-old traditions of the harmonious music and movement of the heavenly spheres, Pratt spoke in the earlier poem of a "celestial dance" set to the "perfect orchestration" of him who held the "mighty baton," the "Master of the Skies." The measures of that dance were bungled by the numerous, awkward human imitators of the heavenly grace and expertise:

But when the human dancers met,
 This year — about two billion —
 They fumbled with their minuet
 And CRASH went their pavilion!⁹

The dramatic situation which structures "The Truant" is man being called up before the Master of the Skies (now in the person of the great Panjandrum), to answer for his infernal awkwardness, for his being *out of step* in the celestial dance. Here the dance is seen in the character of a court entertainment which requires the direction of a Master of the Revels, and it is he who levels the charge against truant man of walking "with tangential step unknown / Within the weave of the atomic pattern" (ll. 14-15), while the Panjandrum recites the accusations of "singing out of key" and "shuffling in the measures of the dance" (ll. 66, 68). In one early draft of "The Truant" the Master of the Revels "trained his cosmoscope / Upon the ballet of the fiery molecules" rather than on his captive, but Pratt revised the lines in accordance with the new poem's emphasis on man (as compared with the cosmic interest of "Out of Step"), shifting the subject for the microscopic investigation to the truant.

It should be noted, however, that it is typical of Pratt that once he has hit upon a particularly euphonic phrase or striking image he is unwilling to discard it lightly, and so "the ballet of the fiery molecules" found its place elsewhere in the poem at l. 27. But the phrase "rumba of the stars" which came to Pratt's mind

at the initial drafting of lines for the poem never met the demands of rhyme, rhythm and sense at any one point in the poem so it was reluctantly dropped. Similarly, other examples of the terminology of music and dance, vestiges of "The Truant"'s relationship to "Out of Step," disappeared or were modified as the drafts developed. The Master of the Revels, describing his rebellious captive at one early stage of the writing, added, "I have vowed to make a dancer of him"; this despite the fact that his unwilling pupil "forswears all tempo." An unrhymed and unpolished statement of the truant's rebellion was also phrased in terms of music and dance:

I will not join your ballet, sing your chorus
I'm six feet tall and two feet wide
And fourteen stone You
Out of the fire water slime, I crawled found dry land
 fugitive from the dance

The air of Renaissance court masque that lingers in the poem as we now have it was once a stronger controlling metaphor in the verse, for the charges against the truant at one point included the disparaging of the fawning audience of the Panjandrum's cosmic pageant, or as Pratt put it:

I now indict you of your capital crime
...
Your foul unmitigated arrogance dissonance
Of singing out of key, ~~leaving the dance~~
And leaving that dance
And jeering at our universal claque.

A proposed title for the poem, "Off-Stage," appears in both notebook drafts and suggests that for some time Pratt conceived of the whole poem as a kind of pre-show confrontation between director and reluctant actor. "Still on the Stage" was another prospective title for the poem and it too emphasized its dramatic context.¹⁰ A character called the Astronomer Royal was also originally a part of the court masque cast, though he did not survive the third draft of the opening lines of the poem. To him was initially assigned a part in the opening question-and-answer sequence of the poem, with the Astronomer Royal in the role of custodian of the truant and the Master of the Revels in that of interrogator. The Master of the Revels did survive, however, and he remains a somewhat incongruous relic of this stage of the poem's development. The highly dramatic structure of the poem is a happier result of Pratt's handling of his subject matter in the fashion of a Renaissance court masque.

Chaos, Old Night and Apollo proved to be the only survivors of another group of characters who were excised from the poem. They had found their way into the verse as the result of the only factual research Pratt seems to have done for this poem. On the title page of the notebook in Box 4, no. 33¹¹ are notes on the Greek

One more revision saw the cutting of much of the mythological material and the emergence of the passage in a form similar to the one in which we know it:

[Prelude to birth postlude to death]

And when one day pondering an colith
 We suddenly grew conscious of your age
 And turned a human page [fern and fungus breath]
 We jettisoned the cosmic myths
 With all its baby symbols to explain
~~The sunlight in Apollo's eyes~~ [our rising pulses]
 Chaos and darkness and the birth of pain
 The sunlight in Apollo's eyes
 And it was then we learned how to anatomize
 Your body calibrate your size
 And set a mirror up before your face
 To show what you really were a rain
 Of dull Lucretian atoms crowding space
 A series of concentric waves which any fool
 Could make by dropping stones within a pool
 Or as a bursting bomb forever in flight
 Within a slough of Chaos and Old Night.

Such large-scale excision and revision is matched on a smaller scale by the evolution of individual lines, couplets or groups of lines. We can, for example, trace what became of ll. 148-50 through nine stages to their present form. At first there is simply a list of rhyming pairs in the right-hand margin of a drafted stanza:

pain
 cosmic stain
 earth
 birth

The last line of the drafted stanza

The rising pulses and the birth of pain

incorporated the first and last words from the list, suggesting that Pratt was considering a couplet with an internal rhyme here.

In the next stage at varying intervals in the right-hand margin of the revised stanza appear the phrases:

prelude to birth postlude to death
 fern and fungus breath
 our rising pulses.

Then after rejecting

That blend of fern and fungus breath,

Pratt filled out the line to complete the couplet and reversed the association of "prelude" with "birth" and "postlude" with "death" in this fashion:

Fear and the fern and fungus breath
 Postlude to birth prelude to death.

But still not happy with the result, he tried yet again, immediately modifying the second line as he wrote:

Fear and that fern and fungus breath
~~Which steals upon us at our death~~
 That clogs our nostrils at our death.

In the next draft the couplet does not appear as a unit, the line "The rising pulses and the birth of pain" standing on its own. But by the following re-writing the three lines are brought together, though the last line is still undergoing internal change:

Our rising pulses and the birth of pain,
 Fear and that fern-and-fungus breath
 That clog the approach of
 Clogging our nostrils at our death.

Two more attempts at this troublesome line follow, as

Which stalks our nostrils to the caves of death,

yields to

Stalking our nostrils to our caves of death.

In the reasonably complete draft of the poem in the notebook of Box 4, no. 33, the lines reach their final form, except for the punctuation which is not fixed until the typescript versions.

Our rising pulses and the birth of pain
 Fear and that fern-and-fungus breath
 Stalking our nostrils to our caves of death — .

It should be emphasized that such experimentation with the form and placement of individual lines is typical of Pratt's writing process, and that the experimentation continues in some cases through typescript and manuscript versions.

Lines 32-33 of the poem

The chemists have sent back the same old story — / 'With
 our extreme gelatinous apology,'

were first drafted as

Our chemists have returned the same old story
 With the most humble*
 apology

By the next draft they read:

* word is unclear in manuscript.

We
 The chemists have returned the same old story
 With our most debased apology.

The first typescript version appears as:

The chemists have sent back the same old story —
 “With our most debased apology, . . .”

Typescript one A shows an emendation of the second line to read:

“With our knee-bent gelatinous apology, . . .”

and in succeeding typescripts and published versions the lines reach and retain the form in which we know them.

Line 7 of the poem as it appears in the *Collected Poems*, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), “By the keen logic of your two-edged sword!” did not become part of the poem until it was published in book-form in *Still Life and Other Verse* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1943). Line 122, “drew / Your mileage through the Milky Way,” did not reach its present form until the re-publication of the poem in the *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1944). Before that time typescripts and published versions had read: “drew / Your *mumu’s* through the Milky Way.”

A COMPARISON OF THE VERSIONS of the poem from the final holograph version, which totalled 178 lines, through the typescript versions of varying lengths, to the final form of 190 lines in the *Collected Poems* (1958), shows just how much revision and expansion Pratt demanded from himself even when the outlines of the poem were fixed. Typescript one shows significant variants from the final version in ten places. The Panjandrum is addressed as a “universally acknowledged Lord!” at l. 6, rather than as a “forcibly acknowledged Lord!” Entirely absent from typescript one are line 7 (discussed previously), ll. 47-52,

Pulled forward with his neck awry,
 The little fellow six feet short,
 Aware he was about to die,
 Committed grave contempt of court
 By answering with a flinchless stare
 The Awful Presence seated there,

and ll. 72-73, “You have fallen like a curse / On the mechanixs of my Universe.” The variants on l. 33, “With our extreme gelatinous apology,” and l. 122, “Your mileage through the Milky Way” are discussed above. The “spavined troglodyte” (as it becomes in typescript three) is at this point a “cocktailed¹² troglodyte.” Rather than “ordered the notes” at l. 133, typescript one has “paraded the notes.”

And ll. 172-73 then read: "Will catch you blind and reeling and will send / You on that long and lonely. . . ."

Besides the change in l. 133 noted already, the only significant change between typescripts one and one-A is the modification of "dust" to "ash" in l. 164, "We grant you power, and fire / That ends in ash." Lines 72-73 are added in typescript two and ll. 47-52 first appear in typescript three.

The early holograph drafts are punctuated extremely lightly, but the final holograph draft in the notebook of Box 4, no. 33 shows evidence of a conscious effort to guide the reader by means of punctuation. The typescripts of the poem reveal Pratt polishing the grammatical aspects of his punctuation, for example, removing the comma after "size" in l. 152, "calibrate your size / And set a mirror up . . .," and closing the quotation marks that had formerly been left open after the truant's final vaunt, "No! by the Rood, we will not join your ballet" (l. 190).

A collation of any of the published versions of "The Truant" with that of the *Collected Poems* (1958), reveals a mistake in the latter, and since it has been the copy text for most, if not all, subsequent republications of the poem, the error has been perpetuated. In both typescripts two and three, l. 28, "His concepts and denials — scrap them, burn them —" appears at the top of a new page. In the *Canadian Forum* version of the poem, 22 (December 1942), 264-65, as well as those of *Still Life* and the *Collected Poems* (1944), the line begins a new stanza, consistent with the rest of the poem's practice of assigning a new verse paragraph to each new speaker, but in the *Collected Poems* (1958) this stanza division has been lost. Both the rules of grammar and consistency with the rest of the poem argue that this division should be restored.

Northrop Frye reports that Pratt revised the poem yet again¹³ for the 1958 *Collected Poems*, toning down the rebellious nature of the "little genus *homo*," but ultimately Pratt was convinced by the judgment of his friend and editor that the original version was the better poem, whatever the poet's change of heart may have been.

And when all the revision was completed, what did Pratt think of the poem? Another letter from Ernest Sirluck¹⁴ to A. J. M. Smith records that Pratt spoke of it as "the present development of his central practice" indicating that the symbolism of "The Truant" was in the mainstream of Pratt's poetic practice, and that he saw himself as a symbolic poet rather than as a chronicler or ballad-maker. Yet there is no record of Pratt's ever having referred to "The Truant" as his favourite poem, that distinction being reserved at different times for "The Roosevelt and the *Antinoe*," "The *Titanic*" and "Brébeuf and His Brethren." The observations he did make on the poem are largely restricted to thematic comments such as this:

The theme is the revolt of the human individual against tyrannical power. Man through evolution has become a truant from the original dance of the atoms. He

has developed concepts, a will of his own, a moral sense and a spirit of adventure which refuses regimentation. He has left the stage and gone off on his own but is discovered by the Master of the Revels whose job it is to superintend the festival of fire. The man is brought up before the great Panjandrum of the Universe for trial. He is accused of singing out of key and of walking out of step and the Judge or Panjandrum assigns to him a penalty — not only of death but of being sent back after death to join the original molecules of fire in their eternal revolution. The Judge relates the man's ancestral past and the man replies that everything of value which the universe possesses is created by man himself and that this is a part of human nature which survives death and the material universe. The free personality is something immeasurably greater than mere bulk and power and physical motion.¹⁵

The evolutionary road of Pratt's thought on the relationship between cosmic order, man and a ruling power, from its first expression in "Out of Step" to its polished articulation in "The Truant" was indeed a long one. Thematically, Pratt moved from presenting the orthodox Christian position which sees universal disorder as a result of man's fall from grace, to a more broadly humanistic position which views whatever there is of either order or disorder in the universe as a manifestation of man's thought and action. Stylistically, the development was more complex, though the stages have been clearly traced.

IN FACT, THE DEVELOPMENT of almost all the poems after those of *Newfoundland Verse* can be studied by scholars interested in the genesis and evolution of Pratt's poems, as much of the draft material has been preserved in the Pratt Collection of Victoria College. The introductions and explanations that Pratt wrote for much of his verse are also among these papers and they often provide information about the original impetus towards the writing of a poem.

Sometimes the germ of a poem has become fairly well known, as is the case with "The *Titanic*." The ship went down very close to Pratt's home in Newfoundland, but it was the aspects of irony in the disaster that particularly drew him to it as a poetic subject. Pratt, in speaking of how he came to write the poem, said,

My interest in the loss of the *Titanic* was always more than a desire to record a story, a concern more with the implications of the disaster than with the factual side of it, though of course the impression has to be produced through the facts. It is a study in irony, probably the greatest single illustration of the ironic in marine history. I do not think that the public have ever been completely aware of how deeply involved the *Titanic* was in the web of fate. It was as if the order of events had been definitely contrived against a human arrangement.¹⁶

Part of the irony was reinforced for Pratt by his meeting with Marconi on the day before the inventor's history-making reception of a trans-Atlantic radio-signal and the resulting elation that Pratt shared with so many others at the promise of

no more disasters at sea, no more of the grief he knew so intimately. Relating the number of safeguards built into the *Titanic*, Pratt explained:

And the greatest of all lifesavers was the wireless which for ten years before 1912 had demonstrated its wonderful efficiency in the rescue of life at sea. I remember the intimate contact with wireless which a number of us had in Newfoundland just at the time of the achievement. I was attending the public school at St. John's where we had a remarkable teacher of Science, a man named Holloway. . . . We were just getting over the thrill of the discovery of the X-ray, the Roentgen ray which he was demonstrating to us in his laboratory, when he announced to us that a greater thrill was awaiting at the House of Assembly where the class in Physics went to see Marconi in person. . . . No one knew why Marconi was in town, or what he was doing up on Signal Hill a mile away at the mouth of the harbour. It was a dead secret only disclosed the next morning when the papers headlined the fact he had bridged the Atlantic from Signal Hill to Lizard Point in Cornwall with wireless telegraphy. I mention this because accompanying the thrill was the widespread confidence and boast that the days of great disasters at sea were soon to be ended.

And the most powerful set on the ocean had been installed on the *Titanic*, with a radius of 1,000 miles at night. They said it was inconceivable in this modern age with the ocean alive with ships that a steamer could founder before her passengers and crew were taken off by a rescuing ship. . . . When the news of the disaster came to New York, Marconi, who was in the city at the time, and who was preparing to go back to Europe upon the *Titanic* on the return trip, wouldn't believe the report.¹⁷

Pratt's connection to Marconi and Marconi's to the *Titanic* disaster were part of the strange and fateful web of circumstance that so attracted the poet to the event.

Little, if any, of this is new information, but often the germ of a poem is less well known. Few people are aware, for example, that "The Depression Ends," to quote Pratt, "sprang out of a single word." His holograph introduction to the poem expands on this comment about how it was written:

My friend and colleague P[elham] E[dgar] shouted at me as I was passing his room in the college one day not very long ago to come in and look at a word which he had just read in the A[tlantic?] M[onthly?]. Here's a word which has never been in a poem to his knowledge, the word 'prognathic.' "I'll stump you," he said, "to get a poem out of it. . . ."

I went home and said to Mrs. P[ratt], "What does the word suggest to you?" She closed her eyes and saw a Dickensian character, a Dominie, standing, birch in hand, over a squad of cringing schoolboys. . . . "Well, what are you going to do with her? Are you going to make her the heroine or the villain of the poem?"

"No," I said, "I am not going to have anything to do with her, except that she is going to suggest the content of the poem by contrast."¹⁸

The poem he wrote was, of course, filled with the spirit of generosity.

Sometimes poems grew out of direct personal experience, as was the case of "The 6000" which, Pratt said,

was suggested by a ride from Toronto to Belleville in the cab of a fast locomotive of the 6000 series. The speed, power and roar of the engine presented the analogy of a monster — a bull conceived in ancient fable with fire for breath and steam for blood.¹⁹

At other times, generally accepted truths would be undermined by some current event and Pratt's new insight would be given a literary form. Such was the case, according to Pratt, with "The Prize Cat":

"The Prize Cat" . . . refers to Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia just before the Second World War. I had been pondering over the illusion that, with the growth of civilization and culture, human savagery was disappearing.²⁰

At still other times, it was a written source that first prompted Pratt's poetic energies. Speaking about the origin of "The *Roosevelt* and the *Antinoe*" Pratt revealed:

there was quite a long incubation period of straight amazement at the magnitude of the rescue without any formulated intention on my part to write about it. I first saw the account of it headlined in our Toronto papers and was so struck by the heroic outlines that I sent for and obtained copies of the New York papers and later of the English papers. . . .²¹

To observe that Pratt followed a pattern of exhaustive research following his decision to write a long poem on any given topic has by now become a commonplace of Pratt criticism, but often the sources and extent of his research have not come to light. The poet's comments about the sinking of the *Titanic* suggest some of the resources he may have drawn on in assembling information for his narrative of the event:

I do not suppose there is in this century a single "local" event which has given rise to more discussion and heart-probing than the loss of the *Titanic*. Witness the length of the list in the *Periodical Index*, and the volumes — two of them during the past year — relating the reminiscences of the survivors and casting new light upon the disaster. . . . I had heard many people say that after seeing the film *Cavalcade*, the one unforgettable impression was the inscription of the name *S.S. Titanic* on the lifeboat when the lovers were taking their journey across the Atlantic.²²

In another commentary on the poem Pratt quotes somewhat imperfectly from the report of the U.S. Senate Committee headed by Senator W. A. Smith that investigated the disaster, so he was obviously familiar with this source of information in one form or another. Furthermore, he not only familiarized himself with the records of the operations of the White Star Line to which the *Titanic* belonged, going so far as to secure menus of what would have been served to the ill-fated passengers, but he also sunk himself in the trade rivalries of the period. A very different kind of research went into the section titled "D-179." The technical terms used in the poker game Pratt gleaned from conversations with Pelham Edgar and other poker-playing friends. A variety of other resources, including books, articles

and technical reports of the disaster contributed in a general way to Pratt's feeling for the atmosphere and events of the ship's fatal maiden run.

Much of this research found its way directly into the poem. The rivalry between the shipping lines makes its appearance in the opening lines as Pratt narrates the way in which the *Titanic* out-classed the Hamburg-American's *Imperator*, and again as a topic for discussion in the dining saloon as the possibility of the *Titanic* outstripping the speed of the Cunard liner *Mauretania* is debated. The menus of the White Star Line were well utilized in "7.30 p.m. at a Table in the Dining Saloon" as Pratt used an itemized list of food and spirits to counterpoint the conversation of the diners and illustrate the scale of pretension to which the *Titanic* rose.

PRATT SEEMS TO HAVE NEEDED a special intimacy with his subject-matter, a physical closeness to it, to write at his best in the narrative poems. Commenting on the value of the reconstruction of Fort Ste. Marie and St. Ignace Pratt said: "There is something very dramatic in the very matter of exactitude. Indefiniteness is always a psychological loss to a pilgrim who is visiting a shrine."²³ It was just such a heightened sense of the dramatic and a psychologically convincing portrayal of the events he narrated that Pratt sought to achieve in paying such careful attention to detail in the writing of his verse. Thus, to prepare himself to write "Brébeuf and His Brethren" he not only sunk himself in the literary accounts of the history but he also made

a number of visits to the shrines and the sites of the ancient missions to get some knowledge of the topography, of the flora and fauna, of the rocks and trees, the trails, the waterways, the edible roots and the proper names personal and geographical. . . .²⁴

For "Behind the Log" he spent several days at sea aboard ships that participated in Convoy SC 42, or ones similar to them. He interviewed seamen who had been at the Battle of Cape Farewell. He secured copies of the Forms and General Instructions relating to convoys and even paid a visit to the Norse-Canadian Trading Company office in Toronto in order to get an authentic Norse translation of the words he wanted to put into the mouth of the Norwegian captain at the Convoy Conference.

Pratt's need for direct contact with his subject-matter is perhaps best illustrated by his struggles with the writing of "The *Roosevelt* and the *Antinoe*." Pratt relates that after reading the newspaper reports in January 1926,

I did think that possibly during the following summer . . . I would make an attempt at it, which I did, but I realised that I was making a failure of it. I had selected a light mode of verse, the faster tetrameter in which "The Cachalot" was written. I saw it wouldn't go; the material broke the mould and so I abandoned it.²⁵

It took the stimulus of several scientific articles on the radio compass (an instrument that had played a crucial role in the rescue) and renewed press interest in Captain Fried that was occasioned by his rescue of the *Florida* on January 23, 1929, to fully re-excite Pratt's interest in the *Roosevelt's* rescue of the *Antinoo* as a poetic subject. But in the meantime he had written to the U.S. Steamship Line to get permission to visit the *Roosevelt*, a trip which was made in early January of 1929. He secured a passenger's diary, the logs of both ships, the exact messages which had been flashed back and forth between the two ships during the rescue operations and the contracts made between the master and sailors, signed before the departure. He was shown and allowed to operate the wireless, direction-finder and lifeboats aboard the *Roosevelt* and with the help of the second officer retraced from stateroom to deck the steps of the priest who had attempted to administer the last rites to the drowned sailors. Pratt had to leave the actual writing of the poem until the university year was over, but it was then drafted with relative ease in the summer of 1929 and published in early 1930.

We can document the practice of undertaking such thoroughgoing research for the first time in the writing of "The Cachalot." In an address on his publishing career Pratt explained how he came to choose the subject and also why he thought research such an important part of the writing process.

I began hunting for a subject which would require some research and *give body to poetry* [my emphasis] and I thought of whale-fishing. I had seen whales alive and dead. I had seen them in the harbours of Newfoundland, particularly at Moreton's Harbour where I taught school for two years. I rowed around them where they lay dead after capture prior to their manufacture into oil. I realized that at last I had a subject which could lend itself to research — to the digging up of the raw material. . . .²⁶

Pratt's notes to the poem published in *Verses of the Sea* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1930) indicate two literary sources Pratt used in his research: Frank Bullen's *The Cruise of the Cachalot Round the World After Sperm Whales* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1899) was no doubt consulted for the fight between the kraken and the cachalot, and it may have suggested the poem's title. Alpheus Verrill's *The Real Story of the Whaler: Whaling Past and Present* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1916) contributed other details of whaling expeditions and the object of their enterprise.

The fact that early drafts of "The Cachalot" can be found in a notebook which also contains copious notes on *Moby Dick* opens again the whole vexed question of the relationship between Pratt's poem and Melville's novel. Considering this fact, the striking structural similarities²⁷ and many other "coincidental likenesses" — such as the fact that Melville's *Pequod* meets (in Chapter 52) a whaling boat called the *Albatross*, the name Pratt chose for his whaling vessel in "The Cachalot" — one is inclined to think that *Moby Dick* was another source book.

In addition to personal experience and literary sources, the poem also benefited from Pratt's consultations with Frederick Banting regarding "data about [the] internal constitution of marine mammalia."²⁸ One humorous result of this relationship was the mock-heroic passage about the cachalot's pancreas and liver which was, if Pratt is to be believed, written because of the wide-spread current interest in those organs resulting from Banting's research. The notebooks in the Pratt Collection show that Pratt's own research included a lot of fact-hunting about early explorers, whalers, and whaling, as well as the assembly of a great deal of information about whales, krakens, and other forms of marine life. These materials were worked into the verse to give it an air of authenticity.

The research carried out for the companion poem of the *Titans* volume was even more extensive if the amount of factual notes which precede the drafts are an accurate measuring standard. Pratt carried out an intensive study of geologic ages, flora, fauna, geography, diseases and disorders of a dietary origin, and weather patterns in Southeast Asia for "The Great Feud." Though most of the information seems to have come from written sources, Pratt's visit to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in June of 1926 when he was already at work on the poem, provided him with the object of his search for a counterpart to the semi-intelligent, female anthropoidal ape:

I went to the zoological section and noticed that a whole floor was occupied by the skeleton of a carnivorous dinosaur named Tyrannosaurus Rex. I looked at a number of the dinosaur's eggs which had been dug up in the Gobi desert, petrified of course through age and of enormous size. I said to myself — "What a monster to introduce into the fight."²⁹

The impetus and the structuring principle behind "The Fable of the Goats" was a combination of the political situation in Europe in the mid-1930's and a little-known Aesop's fable. According to Pratt, Aesop's "Fable of the Goats" became "the basis of a rather elaborate poetic symbolism which . . . reflect[s] in an ironic manner contemporary world conditions."³⁰ Pratt's outside research for the poem was principally geological as he reports:

I had to consult a geologist in order to construct aright the structure and strata of the mountain range on which the duel between the two goats took place. I wanted an exceedingly slippery rock and Professor Thompson gave me the names of a number of rocks, amongst which was schist, which he said would be geologically and mineralogically authentic.³¹

One could examine at greater length the origins and research processes behind Pratt's narrative poems, but I have cited the preceding cases as the most interesting and illustrative of the widely varied kinds of impetus by which the poet was motivated, and the equally varied kinds of investigation he undertook to give substance to his work. It is not possible within the confines of this paper to trace each poem discussed through its development in drafts, typescripts and publica-

tions; for the road from the "Java" of Pratt's thought and expression in manuscript drafts, to its "Geneva" in the production of a finished poem, is typically a lengthy and involved one. The detailed study of "The Truant" shows the kinds of intense revision this commonly meant for Pratt. When writing a narrative poem, the poet was careful to ensure that he was factually accurate in every detail and thoroughly knowledgeable about the environment and atmosphere in which he set his tales. Characteristically, Pratt would seek to attain this knowledge at first hand in order to have the details of an incident vividly and accurately set in his mind. Then, and only then, could he begin the long and demanding process of transforming the stammer of his ideas into articulate expression.

NOTES

- ¹ "First Person: An Interview with Jed Adams," transcribed from a tape in the CBC archives, Toronto. The programme, which was written and produced by Lloyd Chester, was aired in 1959.
- ² Ernest Sirluck file, A. J. M. Smith Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, Univ. of Toronto.
- ³ In an address delivered at a testimonial dinner to mark the publishing of *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* Pratt remarked, "the University vacation [is] the only time I have for writing" (Notebook, Box 9, no. 65, E. J. Pratt Collection, Victoria College Library, Univ. of Toronto).
- ⁴ Holograph in pen on small slip of paper, Box 4, no. 34, E. J. Pratt Collection. I have punctuated this and other Pratt prose commentaries in order to facilitate reading.
- ⁵ The story was recounted by an anonymous book reviewer in Article VII, *Quarterly Review*, XCV (1854), 516-17. The anecdote, which is full of *non-sequiturs*, was designed to test the memory of the actor, Charles Macklin. Pratt's epithet "great Panjandrum" may be an imperfect memory of Foote's "Grand Panjandrum."
- ⁶ Sandra Djwa, *E. J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision* (Vancouver: Copp Clark, 1974).
- ⁷ Undated letter, Northrop Frye file, A. J. M. Smith Collection.
- ⁸ Notebook, Box 4, no. 30, E. J. Pratt Collection. All subsequent quotations from manuscript drafts are from this notebook unless otherwise stated.
- ⁹ This, and all quotations of "The Truant" with line numbers cited, are from E. J. Pratt, *The Collected Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).
- ¹⁰ Another title which appears to read "Still on the Rungs" seems to have no dramatic context at all, but may be meant to suggest an evolutionary scale.
- ¹¹ Why these notes should appear here rather than with the earlier drafts I have been unable to discover.
- ¹² "Cocktailed" in this context means an animal of less than pure breed.
- ¹³ I have found no evidence that this revised version has survived.
- ¹⁴ Undated letter, Ernest Sirluck file, A. J. M. Smith Collection.
- ¹⁵ Notebook, Box 4, no. 33, E. J. Pratt Collection.

- ¹⁶ Typescript, Box 3, no. 18, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ¹⁷ Typescript, Box 3, no. 18, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ¹⁸ Notebook, Box 7, no. 51, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ¹⁹ E. J. Pratt, holograph introduction to "No. 6000," *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse*, Book 4, ed. C. L. Bennett and Lorne Pierce (Toronto: Ryerson and Macmillan, 1935), p. 544.
- ²⁰ Notebook, Box 7, no. 60, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²¹ Notebook, Box 9, no. 65, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²² Notebook, Box 3, no. 16, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²³ Typescript, Box 3, no. 24, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²⁴ Typescript, Box 3, no. 24, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²⁵ Notebook, Box 9, no. 65, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²⁶ Typescript, Box 9, no. 69.4, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²⁷ See Robert Gibbs, "The Living Contour: The Whale Symbol in Melville and Pratt," *Canadian Literature*, 40 (Summer 1969), 17-25.
- ²⁸ Typescript, Box 9, no. 70.3, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ²⁹ Typescript, Box 1, no. 6, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ³⁰ Typescript, Box 3, no. 21, E. J. Pratt Collection.
- ³¹ Typescript, Box 9, no. 70.3, E. J. Pratt Collection.

THE SMALLEST DETAILS

Bert Almon

You could call him cautious, or timid:
 prudent is the word that he'd select.
 He wears a red shirt to eat spaghetti,
 and for the colder nights he turns on
 the electric blanket a little early
 and puts his pajamas under it to warm.
 But when he goes to meet her — the joker,
 the casual one who puts his ways down
 to a sign of the zodiac — he forgets
 his gloves, scarf, hat, and once even
 fumbled his car keys into a snowbank.