

# POET OF APOCALYPSE

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**A**N APOCALYPSE is an uncovering of what has been covered. The disclosure takes the form of a dream or vision, revealing in a psychological sense what is subliminal to human consciousness. Any work of the imagination is a kind of apocalypse, but we generally reserve the label for those that have the alpha-and-omega scope associated with the last book of the New Testament. We might easily call a poem like Pratt's "The Cachalot" apocalyptic since it explores hidden places and depicts a leviathan big enough symbolically to encompass the whole of creation. Yet "The Cachalot" 's symbolic strength resides in its physical solidity. To release his imagination the poet has not had to go beyond the bounds of possibility; he has created the illusion of being wide awake and objectively faithful while suspending as much as necessary his literal awareness. The works I wish to examine are two which allowed a more overtly free play of imagination and a more conscious removal from everyday reality. The poet has cast them as dreams, visions or fantasies. Perhaps the chief source of irony in these poems lies in the fact that their inherent significance — what they disclose imaginatively — varies inversely with their conscious intent — what the poet set out to disclose. Of the two, *The Witches' Brew* and "The Great Feud", the first is richer in ironic and symbolic possibilities largely because in writing it Pratt was as free from conscious designs on his readers as on his own imagination.

What he did set out to do in *The Witches' Brew* he described in a letter to Desmond Pacey: "I must confess that the only didacticism I had in mind when I scribbled that fantasy was to get away from the dead seriousness of much of Newfoundland verse. . . . I wanted to strike a new vein which generally has persisted til the present with sufficient variation (I hope) to break the monotony of tone."<sup>1</sup> Such a disclaimer will not prevent any reader from seeing in the poem much more than a refusal to be serious. What Pratt was turning from was not seriousness but "dead seriousness," and what he was trying to strike was not a new vein for a particular work but a new direction for himself as a poet. The conscious rebellion behind the poem is not against the mechanics of the universe but against the mechanics he had too often geared his imagination to in the early poems. The poem, then, is itself a rebellion and an effort toward self-discovery,

a releasing of the poet's imagination so that he himself might know it better. The apocalyptic aspect of the poem comes from its exploration of the limits of freedom and control within the poet himself as poet, an exploration that the reader will inevitably extend.

Compared as a total form to "The Cachalot" or "The Great Feud", *The Witches' Brew* lacks solidity of body. This is apparent from the physical appearance of its ten sections on the page — the free breaking in of dialogue, inventory and prose description. Even the passages of continuous narrative vary greatly in pace and procedure, for the poet allows himself room for asides, gratuitous scraps of erudition and generous catalogues. The importance of pace is particularly noticeable in the opening sections, where the poet is taking his time in laying the table for his banquet-binge. He savours every detail for itself and expends the same care here as with one of his famous stag dinners. The one constant that gives the form its true elasticity is the tetrameter measure. Although Pratt works it with all possible freedom, and although it is not as portentously present as the "great consonant" of "The Cachalot", it is still there in the poem as an unremitting regulatory force. The tetrameter measure, as it does in *Hudibras*, effects an ironic detachment, which allows for a full imaginative engagement and which asserts its own irony against the thematic material of the poem. In this way, the rhetorical pattern, while it allows for elasticity of shape — giving the poet room to do all that he desires — demands, as true elastic does, a return to order. It is a forming agent and an informing force. The limits of freedom and control assert themselves in the poem as a poem first, so that the "brew" and its dispensing are not just matters of the poem — they are the poem.

The poem as an "apocalyptic dinner" is a submarine counterpart of the marriage supper of the Lamb. As such, its burlesque character is not so much a mockery or take-off of the biblical picture of final things as an effort to turn inside out the arbitrary order imposed on creation by dogmatic restrictions. The witches complete their concoction according to a formula which seems to reflect the divine view of things when they add to the alcoholic base —

Cold-blooded things yet not marine,  
 And not of earth, but half-between,  
 That live enclosed within the sand  
 Without the power of locomotion,  
 And mammal breeds whose blood is hot,  
 That court the sea but love it not,  
 That need the air but not the land, —  
 The Laodiceans of the ocean.

There is a judgment here against half-way creatures, but unlike the Divine Judge, who spews Laodiceans out of his mouth, or Dante, who allows them no place in heaven or hell, Pratt's generous vision includes them in the feast, if not as partakers, at least as food. But the witches, once started, stick to no formula. The catalogue of actual ingredients departs freely from the sanctioned recipe and includes anything from an Ungava bull moose to Zulu hams. This generous refusal to make a separation between sheep and goats is typical of a poem which develops expansively to test any limits it asserts.

One of the more obvious ironies of the poem is that the creature chosen to maintain order, to act as sentinel over the brew and the elect, is Tom, the cat from Zanzibar, himself an archetypal rebel. Yet the choice is appropriate to the experiment, which is to bring total release from natural discipline to a whole order of creatures. In depicting Tom, Pratt clearly sees him as a cosmic force, a Lucifer in the natural order:

No leopard, lynx or jaguar  
 Could match this cat from Zanzibar  
 For whiskers that from ear to chin  
 Ran round to decorate his grin.  
 And something wilder yet than that  
 Lay in the nature of this cat.  
 It's said that mariners by night,  
 When near a dangerous coast-line, might  
 Recover bearings from the light  
 Of some strange thing that swam and gleamed;  
 A Salamander it might be,  
 They said, or Lucifer that streamed  
 His fiery passage through the sea.

He is a solid creature of Pratt's imagination, clearly a close relative to the omniscient ironist of *Alice in Wonderland*, but he is just as clearly the embodiment of that free force with which the poet himself is moving. He is the central figure of the poem, its most Prattian creation. As such, he symbolizes an imagination freed to rove through the cosmos, to illuminate its dark places with his fiery tail. He electrifies the poem and its readers as he electrifies the banqueters. For all his identification with Lucifer and for all the poet's carefully kept illusion of detachment from his poem, Tom is the creature with whom his creator clearly identifies, since he bodies forth the very spirit which is the poem's impulse.

The identification of Tom with Lucifer is not, at this point in the poem, a moral one. Tom in the expression of his own nature is as free from moral blame as any of the lower creatures. The poet in his imagination, then, enjoys a moral

freedom that he does not otherwise enjoy. This irony is at the heart of the poem and at the heart of Pratt's poetic vision. Poetry itself becomes a means of release from the order of nature and from the moral order, to which man alone is subject. A work of imagination which gives the poet's *alazon* spirit free expression, while by its nature keeping an ironic check upon that spirit, embodies the central paradox of man's place in nature as seen by a rational mind and in a moral universe as seen by a Christian humanist. The imaginative embodiment of an insoluble riddle effects a release from it. Tom's presence at the banquet is itself a guarantee for the electrified revellers of a final revelation.

The "Inventory of Hades" reinforces the central theme. The spirits released through Hell's Gates are not escaping the bonds of individual moral responsibility but are breaking from the restricting, artificial masks that they have had to wear in life. The poet sees them as such roles and not as individuals. The comic tone effected by the cumulative play of rhythm counters any sense of their release with a good-humoured acceptance of their bonds. After all, they come not to partake of the brew's releasing force but to observe rather enviously. The distinction between them and the other creatures lies at the poem's moral centre. The mock-epic question that the poet set out to explore was "The true effect of alcohol/ Upon the cold aquatic mind." This is really another assault on the "monologue of silence", another confrontation with mechanical necessity and the creatures subject to it. But here, the poet's imagination is intent on releasing them from what they are.

The fishes' release is not from moral inhibitions; from them they are already free. Yet their moral innocence is conditional upon their being mechanically determined. The experiment that the devil, the witches and the shades will watch with such interest is to see what effect mechanical freedom will have on creatures already morally free. The destructive chaos that results answers the epic question and brings the circular argument around to its beginning. Moral freedom and mechanical freedom are mutually exclusive, just as moral responsibility and mechanical necessity are mutually exclusive. That man sees himself as simultaneously under both conditions is a dilemma from which only his imagination can free him.

The mechanism by which the witches dispense their brew is hierarchical, carefully calibrated and adjustable to every need. The mechanism by which the poet dispenses his brew to slake his own "vast Elizabethan thirst" is equally well regulated. Just as the volume of traffic in the sea threatens to wreck the witches' mechanism, so Pratt's almost breaks under the force of his imaginative indulgence. The choral comments by the Shades on the chaotic events by their ironic

detachment maintain an order, a rational superstructure over the drunken riot. The pace and the threat of complete collapse heighten when the cauldron is breached. At this point, when a more cautious poet might have drawn back satisfied with the extent of freedom asserted and realized, Pratt chooses to push on to an ultimate stage.

"The Supreme Test" is, then, one for the poet as well as for the witches and Satan. Tom, the archetypal rebel, the embodied assertion of imaginative freedom, will receive enough of the liquor to release his full force into the poem's universe and into the poem. He becomes with the hundredth flagon "... Hell's darkest fiend — / A sea-cat with an awful jag-on", the archetypal fighting Irishman, at war with everything and everyone including himself. He is all natural and metaphysical energy at war with itself, the very spirit of chaos. As the poem is Pratt's means of releasing this infernal and celestial energy into his universe, it also is his means of controlling it, of subduing it to creative ends. As the poem must come to an end, Tom's luminous trail must disappear, driven back to some "mystic goal", the occult source of its creative and destructive being.

The energy and freedom that the poet found here would persist as imaginative potentials for release in later work. No other poet among those published before 1930 expresses as fully and as distinctly Pratt's own peculiar vision.

"The Great Feud", published with "The Cachalot" in 1926, differs in several important respects from *The Witches' Brew*. Fundamental to all differences is the greater degree of conscious intent that controls the poem's narrative and imaginative development. Pratt cast it as an allegory, an animal fable having clear relevance to human affairs.

I have called it a Dream though it might appropriately be termed a nightmare. What might happen in a Second War or a Third, though naturally the A-Bomb and the Hydrogen type were not forming their terrible mushrooms. It is an Armageddon between the inhabitants of the land and those of the sea. It is an attempt to give a picture of some stage in the evolutionary struggle for existence, of how near extinction a race might come if the instinct of aggression were given absolute rein.<sup>2</sup>

From this statement in retrospect of the poem's intent, we can see that Pratt's mind was working in at least two directions: one, from the contemporary situation back to an imaginary situation which would effectively allegorize it; and the other, from the remote past to a forward view of the whole evolutionary struggle. This twofold perspective enriches the poem's imaginative possibilities and allows for several valid interpretations, such as those which Sutherland examines.<sup>3</sup> Yet the poet's seriousness of purpose cannot help but circumscribe the possibilities that the poem offers for interpretation.

The release that Pratt allows himself in "The Great Feud" manifests itself as a release of the violence which he consciously abhorred. The freedom he discovered in *The Witches' Brew* lies behind this release, but it comes now closer to the release of nightmare anxiety than to one of wish fulfilment. The ambivalence of attitude toward violence cuts more radically into this poem, effecting at times a greater tension than it can bear. Between what the poet consciously wishes to depict as horror and what he less consciously reveals as self-indulgence, the poem generates an irony that calls into question the deliberate ironies of the allegorical conception. The poem seems to ask the reader to take it both more seriously and less seriously than he is willing or able to do. The result is a fluctuating response, which carried throughout a reading may result in fatigue or frustration.

The poem begins securely enough. The tetrameter measure with its frequent enjambements and interlocking rhymes gives sufficient impetus at the outset and at the same time effectively expresses the slow, inevitable uncoiling of the evolutionary scroll, which forms the basis of the fable. The poem does, in fact, as effectively as it does anything, capsulize in a single episode the whole evolutionary struggle. On this level, it is a vision of all struggle as one struggle, the gathering of all biological time into one time and uncovering there the cumulative magnitude of an endless expense of violence. This revelation is perhaps the most original of its apocalyptic aspects, since it places in the Darwinian principle the fearful possibility that cumulatively it may prove more destructive than creative.

Jurania rises in the poem as a freely imagined and spontaneous creation, though obviously she has a place in the allegorical scheme.

Jurania, with her crater jaw,  
Her slanting forehead ancient-scarred,  
And breathing through her smoky maw,  
Lay like a dragon left to guard  
The Isthmian Scarps against the climb  
Of life. . . .

Clearly, Jurania in the context of biological evolution represents forces more primitive than those at work there. It is fitting that this geological dragon will later release into the poem a biological one, who will link the most primitive and the most developed manifestations of mindless force. The volcano's backward ties become clear at the end of the poem when it erupts ". . . as if to meet/ Its own maternal stellar fire." Jurania in herself contains the central irony in Pratt's view of evolution. As a link between cosmic and biological impulses, her energy is creative; as a check on the upward "climb of life", her energy is retarding. But when she releases her energy into the poem, it is to check, not life, but life run

wild in destructive violence. Her release has also the effect of saving the life most significant to evolution, as though an ultimate purpose behind her insentience were directing her force to that end.

The “fear of racial doom” induced among the fish by changing conditions leads to futile anger which is self-destructive — a “consuming vertigo”. Pratt turns his tetrameter line to good advantage to make mock of this malaise:

It broke their hearts and crushed their wills,  
It thinned the juices of their maws,  
Left them with gnashing of the jaws  
And deep prolapsis of the gills.  
And hitherto unsuffered pains,  
A ghastly brood, came in by legions,  
Rheumatic tremors in the veins,  
And palsy in the ventral regions.

Clearly any movement that turns upon itself, any whirligig motion, such as this vertigo, takes on in Pratt’s imagination the symptoms of psychosomatic disease. Health requires a forward and outward and free expression of impulses. The question that rises now is whether or not the tendency of the poem to assume the character of its matter, which we noted in *The Witches’ Brew*, applies here. Does Pratt’s imagination turn in upon itself? Does the impulse of the poem become a “consuming vertigo” under the constricting force of the central fable? Pratt’s own answer at this early point in the narrative is a clear no, although he too raises the questions as horrors in the fishy consciousness.

But worst of all the horrors which  
Enmeshed them was the galling sense  
That never would the recompense  
Of battle come; the primal itch  
For vengeance would expend its force,  
According to an adverse Fate  
Running a self-destroying course  
Down the blind alley of their hate.

**T**HE FREEDOM which the poet looks for in himself he finds as a saving grace in nature, a quirkiness that keeps her like her fish from “Running a self-destroying course/ Down the blind alley. . . .” Subsequent events do release the fish by providing suitable objects for their destructive impulses. But viewed from a higher vantage point, and the poem as it moves forward demands

such a perspective, the Armageddon that comes is as self-destructive, as much a matter of "consuming vertigo," as the fish's earlier malaise. The quirk has altered "the settled scheme of things" only by universalizing it. I am not at all sure that the poet does not hoist himself and his poem on his own petard. The forward impulse in the poem is almost lost in the display of self-destructive energy.

If Pratt prevented such anomalies from doing the poem irreparable damage, it was done by a strict adherence to his own role as the irreverent observer of the twists and doublings back and struggles for escape in the evolutionary mechanics of the universe. His poem, which moves with these movements, never quite becomes a pointless self-indulgence, since it continues to body forth a distinctive vision.

The female ape holds the centre of the stage through the remainder of the first half of the poem. Her position in the scheme is quite clear. She represents the glimmerings of reason and of moral responsibility. The freedom she enjoys is clearly the freedom to be wrong. Even the reasoning that has brought about in her the birth of ethics is spurious, since she has taken an event of pure chance as manifesting a universal moral principle. The "raw/ Material of the moral law" which she has "sniffed" holds no promise of enlightenment beyond a concept of mechanically retributive justice. She assumes leadership of the land animals before she is able to lead, except toward chaos. Yet her freedom mirrors in its essentials the kind of freedom man enjoys in Pratt's universe, freedom to act with only a glimmering of moral insight, freedom to work out his own destruction as well as his salvation. Pratt's "anxiety-dream" for mankind is implicit in this image of limited freedom with moral responsibility.

Bloated with a sense of her own enlightenment, the ape becomes an alazon figure, guilty of hubris in presuming to pass judgment on a whole order of beings. Her epic address of the land creatures occupies almost a hundred and seventy lines of verse, and although it advances the narrative somewhat, it allows her self-indulgence to spill over into the poem. The poet lets his material expand beyond his slender fable's capacity. A similar expansion occurs in "The Muster". Captivated by his own conceit regarding the effects of vegetarianism on carnivorous animals, the poet gives himself the long leash of a hundred and twenty lines to work it for all it is worth. The material of these lines contains the most Prattian humour of the poem, but again it distends the total form. The critical irony here is that where the poet has, in fact, more limited freedom, he has chosen to take greater liberties.

Tyrannosaurus Rex comes into the poem as part of the poem's process. He represents a doubling back of evolution on itself and so symbolizes the entire



movement of the poem. He is to this poem what Tom is to *The Witches' Brew*, the most original and Prattian creation in it as well as its central symbol. The laborious machinery by which the poet brings him to birth is appropriate to the poem as are his ponderous bulk and movements. He represents the kind of imaginative energy that Pratt is generating here. He dominates the latter part of the poem, though he remains like his creator essentially apart from the rest of creation. He is not as clear a centre of sympathy as Tom. By his very nature, as a mindless creature, impelled by purely mechanical instincts, he remains something of an abstraction. He has none of Tom's vitality and individuality. Only his dumb confusion at being thrust out of his time into a conflict that he cannot understand brings him near his end closer to the poet and his readers. From being an incongruous and ridiculous figure laying about him indiscriminately in the battle scenes, he takes on a kind of pathetic stature in the long climb to his death:

He cleared the base, his body fagged  
 And clambered on from shard to shard,  
 Pausing, jibbing, breathing hard.  
 Under his weight his knee-caps sagged;  
 Bleeding fast from fissures torn  
 By tiger fang and rhino horn  
 He groped and stumbled up until  
 He reached a level granite sill;  
 Raw fillets hanging from his thighs  
 He sank a moment faint with pain;

As a symbol which gathers in the whole force of the poem, apart from the moral and rational glimmerings manifested in the ape, *Tyrannosaurus Rex* has become the object, the victim as well as the repository or sleeping potential of destructive energy. At this point, he appears to symbolize the whole creation and its suffering. The voice of the sea-god who laments his passing is mourning for all "blind wanderers" caught in and destroyed by the evolutionary struggle. *Tyrannosaurus Rex* achieves a certain Christ-like sublimity here, but since no choice, no moral decision, no glimmering of love or sympathy has motivated him, he cannot be taken as Sutherland takes him<sup>4</sup> for a Christ-symbol. His victimization lies in his mindlessness; Christ's, in the supremacy of his awareness. He is the "dark unreason" that reason has unleashed, yet his presence as a "mutual enemy" of land and sea creatures has kept their conflict in abeyance. His death allows in them a total release of violence, which is as primitive and indiscriminating as his own.

In its conclusion, "The Great Feud" re-establishes the poet's vision as primarily

ironic. Jurania, a primal source of destructive power, in her eruption saves creation from self-extinction. The female ape does not deserve to escape by any virtue other than the superiority of her perceptions. She, in relation to Jurania and the whole evolutionary process, represents the involvement of reason and moral awareness with fate or necessity in the unleashing of destruction. She is no tragic figure, since her survival involves no self-discovery or assuming of responsibility. She is a new and unpredictable element in the ironic mesh. Pratt manages to leave her a more sympathetic creature than he finds her at first:

She found her lair, and brokenly  
 She entered in, cuddling her brood  
 To withered paps . . .

What is to the fore here is the instinct of mother-love, more primitive and more universal than reason or moral awareness. The primal powers that have worked in the poem to preserve the highest being in creation manifest a similar concern. The poet continues to see nature as controlled and driven by impulses that contain their opposites. His own imaginative indulgence uncovers the paradox in himself as creator. When the violence in the poem is at its height, the rhetoric exercises its power to detach the reader from it; when the violence subsides or is in abeyance, the rhetoric allows for a closer sympathy between the creator and his creation. In this respect, the form is admirably suited to the conception and can be justified in all its bulk and ponderousness as a natural growth. There is, however, the matter of a deliberateness which is at odds with the freedom that the poet needs to work best within the hyperbolic convention. That the poem brings forth *Tyrannosaurus Rex* is a triumph of the poet's imagination. That *Tyrannosaurus Rex* has not the vitality of Tom, the Cat from Zanzibar, points to a limitation that shows up elsewhere in those distortions which are distortions of the total form.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Desmond Pacey, November 11, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Desmond Pacey, October 29, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> "... *The Great Feud* can be viewed with almost equal validity from at least three distinct standpoints: as . . . a poem of social comment, as an essay in psychological analysis, or as a work of religious vision." John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt; A New Interpretation*, (Toronto; Ryerson, 1956), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> "In fact, as in the case of the whale, it is impossible not to associate the dinosaur with the figure of Christ." *Ibid.*, p. 105.