

THE TENSION OF HIS TIME

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A PROPER UNDERSTANDING of Pratt's poetry needs to take into account the social and intellectual background which conditioned his thought and writing. This background was stabilized by typical late nineteenth century intellectual preoccupations, the most striking characteristic of which was a tension between newly-emerging scientific theory on one hand, and traditional Christian belief on the other. It is this tension which, more than any other single factor, inspires the poetry of Pratt, and in an important way, also confounds it.

Most of Pratt's poems, especially the long, narrative ones, are concerned with reconciling man's crowning, scientific role as potential master of the universe, with his religious role as simply another creature who is subject to God's universal control. But, as a rule, a satisfactory reconciliation is not fully achieved. The poems may be divided into three convenient groups: those describing a world in which God's primacy is undisputed; those in which this primacy is challenged by man; and those in which the challenge of God by man is satisfactorily reconciled.

In the first group of poems Pratt acknowledges the existence of a stable world order ruled by an omnipotent Being who firmly controls all natural phenomena. We see this in the admiration and reverence that are shown to natural relationships in the raw world of sea and forest, man and beast. The poet betrays an almost childish fascination with the age, size and power of forces in Nature: ancient seas, impregnable icebergs and gigantic whales. He is fascinated by the sense of drama generated by the clash of these forces either with each other or with human beings. And always, essential to the drama is the implicit projection of an ageless, harmonious, cosmic pattern; elements within the pattern may often erupt into massive conflict with each other, but they invariably settle down again in rigid conformity.

Artistic success for Pratt largely depends on his ability to demonstrate, through the action of his poetry, the stable, theocratic, world order in which he believes.

Success is achieved, for example, in "Newfoundland" which describes winds blowing over the sea :

They call with the silver fifes of the sea,
They breathe with the lungs of men,
They are one with the tides of the sea,
They are one with the tides of the heart,
They blow with the rising octaves of dawn,
They die with the largo of dusk,
Their hands are full to the overflow,
In their right is the bread of life,
In their left are the waters of death.

"Newfoundland" celebrates the cyclical, cosmic harmony which, according to Pratt, is implicit in the whole seascape of his native province :

Here the crags
Meet with winds and tides —
Not with that blind interchange
Of blow for blow
That spills the thunder of insentient seas ;
But with the mind that reads assault
In crouch and leap and the quick stealth,
Stiffening the muscles of the waves.

Harmony is not accidental, but based upon the almost personal supervision of natural elements by a Power that is self-evidently the God of religious belief. The implication is that man is one of many creatures, playing a subordinate role within a God-controlled universe.

In some poems there is little attempt to mask the specifically Christian sources of Pratt's philosophical outlook. In "From Stone to Steel", for example, he describes the long, evolutionary process of human development :

From stone to bronze, from bronze to steel
Along the road-dust of the sun,
Two revolutions of the wheel
From Java to Geneva run.

While the poem acknowledges this evolutionary (scientific) description of human history, however, it ends with the following stanza :

The road goes up, the road goes down —
Let Java or Geneva be —

But whether to the cross or crown,
The path lies through Gethsemane.

Science may help to explain some of life's mysteries, but a full explanation, it is suggested, can only be gained from the path through Gethsemane — the Christian religion.

If we regard "Newfoundland" and "From Stone to Steel" as successful poems, it is mainly because they achieve intellectual coherence by projecting a consistent philosophical outlook. Intellectual coherence ensures structural unity and ultimately artistic success. In the same way, if we regard many poems in the second group as unsuccessful, it is because they lack strict structural unity by failing to achieve intellectual coherence based on a consistent outlook or point of view. The poems do attempt to portray a world of Christian order; but they also acknowledge human efforts to gain mastery of the world by growing scientific progress. In many cases the poet's religious point of view is directly contradicted by his scientific outlook, and the result is ambivalence or incoherence. Thus structural unity is impaired and artistic success diminished.

"The Cachalot" illustrates the harmful effect of an ambivalent or inconsistent point of view in Pratt's art; it relates an episode in which a great whale battles furiously against a whaling crew and eventually, in the desperation of its death throes, causes its human attackers to drown. The contest ends in stalemate, battle honours being shared equally between the whale and the men. The whale is part of an hierarchy in which, through his great size, he is assigned precedence over smaller creatures. By challenging the whale's claim to precedence, the men challenge the hierarchy of which it is part. In fact, they challenge the ruler of the hierarchy, that is, God Himself.

Pratt's attitude toward the men is sneering and disdainful. He calls them "a puny batch of men" and "this arrogant and impious crew". Their courage and skill arouse his contempt:

For what was iron to that head
And oak to that hydraulic thunder?

In contrast, his admiration of the whale may be seen in his description of its regal posture even in death:

Then, like a royal retinue,
The slow processional of crew,
Of inundated hull, of mast,
Halliard and shroud and trestle-cheek,

Of yard and topsail to the last
 Dank flutter of the ensign as a wave
 Closed in upon the skysail peak,
 Followed the Monarch to his grave.

Yet this attitude — of contempt for the men and admiration for the whale — is not followed with strict consistency. The men are also shown as courageous, skilful, daring and defiant in tackling an adversary of such tremendous strength. Moreover, they persist, despite the dangers, and kill the whale even if it costs them their lives to do it. In praising the whale and sneering at the men Pratt underlines his belief in an hierarchical Christian order; at the same time he admits the progress of human skill and science which enables the men to kill the whale. The result is vagueness and uncertainty; for our reaction to the poem is necessarily confused. If we admire the whale and lament its death, our sorrow will be neutralized at the end by our natural sympathy for the men. Conversely, if we admire the men and grieve for their death, our admiration for the whale will be seriously affected.

“The Cachalot” is representative of poems in the second group, most of which weave uncertainly between asserting and denying man’s subordination to God. These poems generally extol God’s supremacy by praising creatures such as the cachalot which is part of a God-controlled hierarchy; at the same time they suggest that this hierarchy is overthrown by man’s acquisition of dominance through scientific progress. The resulting ambivalence may harm some poems less than others; but it is always harmful; and nowhere is this harmful effect better illustrated than in “The Truant” which has perhaps greater artistic potential than all Pratt’s other works.

“The Truant” deals with a man who is accused of refusing to behave like other creatures in the universe which accept subordination to a power referred to as the “almighty Lord” and “Imperial Majesty”; but the power is not God; it is “the great Panjandrum”, the ruler of a universe of “mechanics”:

A realm of flunkey decimals that run,
 Return; return and run; again return,
 Each group around its little sun,
 And every sun a satellite.

In his defence the man argues that it was he, who through scientific ingenuity, discovered and harnessed the very mechanical principles by which the universe of the Panjandrum operates: he therefore refuses to accept subordination. He proudly recalls his feats of scientific advancement and defies the Panjandrum’s

authority by finally saying "No! by the Rood, we [men] will not join your ballet." Thus the poem concludes with a Christian point of view since the man swears defiance by the Christian Cross.

On the surface the poem seems an eloquent attack on the presumption of mechanistic science in claiming to have explored all the secrets of the universe and therefore to have given scientists full control over it. But there is a radical flaw. On one hand the man boasts about his scientific accomplishments, while on the other he condemns their result — scientific supremacy. Moreover, the man's concluding Christian oath suggests that his scientific achievements were either directed by or in conformity with the tenets of Christian faith. Yet the poem does not demonstrate this alleged conformity between the man's scientific achievement and his Christian faith. The last line of the poem is a wholly unconvincing statement of faith (or prejudice) representing a point of view that contradicts the man's earlier boasting about his scientific progress. Pratt is moved to praise scientific progress which, in the neo-Darwinian terms of his late nineteenth century intellectual background, directly conflicts with Christian belief.

IT IS ONLY in the third and smallest group of his poems that Pratt offers a solution to the underlying conflict between religion and science. This is evident, for example, in "The Titanic", a long, narrative work which sets out to expose the inadequacy of science. We are given the story of the actual sinking of the *Titanic* as it occurred in 1912. Scientific achievement, in this case in the field of engineering, is presented as an act of impiety against a God-given natural order. Pratt successfully reproduces the ironic shift from over-weening confidence at the beginning of the voyage to chaotic desperation at the end. The human suffering involved is secondary to his exposure of the ultimate futility of human scientific endeavour. The distress of the passengers is reported factually without any significant appeal to our sympathy. Whatever sympathy the poet invokes for them pales completely before his unbounded fascination for the iceberg that is the cause of their doom:

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.

The iceberg's victory reinforces the permanence of an ageless cosmic order which, although challenged by man's science, reasserts itself and vindicates the poet's belief in it.

Because of its consistent, anti-scientific bias "The Titanic" remains an artistic whole, unlike poems such as "The Cachalot" and "The Truant" which waver and equivocate in dealing with their main theme. But even "The Titanic" should not be regarded as a wholly successful poem; for it gives an incomplete treatment of the conflict between religion and science, by ignoring or, at any rate, failing to emphasize the real advantages which science has produced. A satisfactory resolution to the conflict would have to take account of both man's accomplishments and his duty to God. Ideally, what was required was a situation in which man, through his science or skill, could appear to be serving God. In this way Pratt could demonstrate that scientific advancement, far from challenging it, reinforced and enhanced God's supreme authority. This was precisely the situation provided by the story of Jean de Brébeuf, the French priest who lived between 1593 and 1649.

"Brébeuf and his Brethren" tells the story of a group of French Jesuits who endured incredible privation and eventual martyrdom in their efforts to proselytize Huron Indians in seventeenth century Canada. As in "The Titanic", the poem is based on an event or a series of events that is historically authentic. So far as the facts are concerned then, as in "The Titanic", the poet deserves praise for historical scholarship. But we do not read poetry primarily to learn history any more than we read novels chiefly to obtain sociological information. More important is the poet's or novelist's vision of life, his philosophical outlook, which is implicit in the way that he presents his information. This is why "Brébeuf" is the culmination of Pratt's poetic career; for it gives the most complete expression of his vision of life or philosophical outlook, elements only of which appear in his other poems.

Brébeuf and his fellow Jesuits prepare themselves for their missionary activities with scientific thoroughness. They exhibit courage, heroism and ingenuity — the same qualities which bring doom to the whaling crew in "The Cachalot" and disaster to the builders and passengers of the *Titanic*. In "Brébeuf", however, these qualities bring triumph and glory to the priests. Whereas the whaling crew and the *Titanic*'s builders commit acts of impiety against God, the French priests operate within a divine framework and, by their courage and ingenuity, reinforce it. While in "The Cachalot" and "The Titanic" Pratt feels warm admiration for the whale and iceberg — the agencies which frustrate human aspiration — he

expresses no similar feeling for the Indians who torture and murder Brébeuf and his fellow priests. The Indians are described as crude and savage, and the best that Pratt can manage is to see them as rather innocent, though dangerous simpletons, in need of humane civilization. If this attitude seems inhumane or racist it serves, nevertheless, to highlight the sacrifice and martyrdom of the priests and to emphasize their admirable qualities.

The martyrdom of the priests is fully consistent with the motives of their mission and their own philosophy of life:

On the prayers,
The meditations, points and colloquies,
Was built the soldier and martyr programme.
This is the end of man — Deum laudet,
To seek and find the will of God, to act
Upon it for the ordering of life,
And for the soul's beatitude.

The death of Brébeuf and his brethren is the logical climax of both their human aspiration and religious faith. Nowhere else has Pratt been able to fuse so successfully the two contradictory elements of his thought — his belief in special human qualities which appear to give men dominance in the universe, and his faith in God as absolute ruler of the universe. In "Brébeuf" alone are men able to exhibit dominant qualities while remaining all the time subject to the absolute rule of God. It is this intellectual coherence that so richly enhances the dramatic intensity of the poem, making it the work in which Pratt's potentiality for dramatic narrative poetry is most fully realized.

"Brébeuf" confirms Pratt's narrowly orthodox, if nominally nonconformist Christianity. The fortitude and self-sacrifice of Brébeuf and his brethren are not inspired by motives such as selfish advancement, diplomatic advantage, military gain, patriotic glory or political manoeuvring. No doubt some of these results did follow the priests' activities which, after all, certainly helped to extend French colonial ventures in Canada. Some secular implications of Brébeuf's mission are mentioned, for example, in Pratt's description of Fort Sainte Marie:

Strategic as a base for trade or war
The site received the approval of Quebec,
Was ratified by Richelieu who saw
Commerce and exploration pushing west,
Fulfilling the long vision of Champlain —
'Greater New France beyond those inland seas.'

But these results were adventitious. The motives of the priests were wholly religious:

not in these [secular motives] the source —
 But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing
 Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
 By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.

In "Brébeuf" Pratt finally succeeds in demonstrating, in its entirety, the view of life that he held throughout his career. It is the view of a harmoniously working, God-controlled universe in which men have a superior rank in relation to their immediate environment, but an inferior one in relation to God.

It would be foolish to deny the narrow and rigidly conventional mould in which Pratt's basic outlook is cast. He was strongly given to spacious scientific generalizations. Like his partial contemporary, Grant Allen, he too digested the basic modes and preoccupations of neo-Darwinian science, especially as they were popularized by Herbert Spencer and, to some extent, by Allen himself. This explains Pratt's apparently inhumane treatment of the Hurons in "Brébeuf"; for he was a social Darwinist. But he was neither a social snob nor a political autocrat. His profound sympathy for the socially deprived or disadvantaged is revealed in several poems, for example, "The Depression Ends" and "The Man and the Machine". His attitude to the Hurons suffers from the limitations of his neo-Darwinism.

Pratt's simple or, at any rate, conventional view of life is wholly consistent not only with his own temperament and upbringing as the son of a clergyman, but also with the social and historical circumstances in which he spent his most formative years. Experiment and innovation were alien to him. In his "Introduction" to *Selected Poems of E. J. Pratt*, Peter Buitenhuis recognizes the poet's tradition-bound cast of mind at least in his style: "Stylistically Pratt remained a contemporary of Tennyson and Hardy." The truth is that Pratt grew up in a Dominion still within the British Empire: his work both in philosophical outlook and technical accomplishment bears the stamp of the colonial conditions in which his basic outlook took shape. He was imitative rather than innovative. While his contemporaries abroad, Pound and Eliot, were blazing fresh trails in poetic theory and technique, he stuck doggedly to safer, more well-beaten paths. No one can seriously praise Pratt for his originality. His best work, "Brébeuf", is a thoroughly conventional poem. Yet for all, it remains, as Northrop Frye has said, "not only the greatest but the most complete Canadian narrative."