E. J. PRATT'S LITERARY REPUTATION

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DURING THE NINETEEN FORTIES and fifties, E. J. Pratt was given a position of pre-eminence in Canadian literary circles similar to that which Bliss Carman enjoyed among poets in still earlier decades of this century. Whether Pratt's poetic reputation will prove more durable than Carman's is a question to which most Canadian literary critics would today deliver a ringing affirmative. "Carman," they say, "is an interesting minor poet possessed of a thin vein of talent and during his lifetime he was very much over-rated. Pratt, however, is Canada's leading poet, the most original and the greatest in theme and execution that this country has ever had. All his work, it is true, is not of equal merit, but his best poems represent an original contribution to the poetry of the English-speaking world. He ought to be better known outside of Canada." And yet, there are curious analogies between the work of Carman and Pratt which lead me to speculate on whether Pratt's conjectured final position in the world of letters will ultimately be radically different from that of Bliss Carman after all.

Both Carman and Pratt acquired their reputation, for the most part, by creating a large bulk of work of a high degree of technical competence upon a limited range of themes which were meaningful to their immediate contemporaries. Carman's idealism — a non-rigorous paradise into which a whole generation beleaguered by Darwinism was glad to escape — was parallelled by Pratt's outdoor world of elemental conflict on a physical level — a world of uninhibited

violence into which a whole generation of frustrated academics were equally glad to escape. Today the academics yawn over "Vestigia" and "Lord of my Heart's Elation", but is there any guarantee that future academics will not also yawn over the even longer and more pointlessly involved "The Great Feud", "The Witches' Brew", and "Towards the Last Spike"?

Technical competence in general, and the mastery of haunting phrase and delicate rhythm in particular, have not saved Carman from the stigma of "minor poet", although even his most severe critics admit his mastery over these attributes. More than any other quality, form in verse is subject to the vagaries of fashion. Today the academic critic finds the colloquial rhythms and hard-hitting bluntness of an Irving Layton or a Raymond Souster more exciting than Carman's most suggestive nuance of sound and image. Such a critic's reaction is honest and natural, but it should not be mistaken for universal critical judgment. There was in England for almost a century a period when the forms, the rhythms, and the narrative techniques employed by E. J. Pratt flourished, but after Wordsworth and his contemporaries launched the "new" poetry of romanticism, where then were Pope and Dryden and Butler and Swift and the techniques which they had devised and used so brilliantly? If James Reaney, for instance, were to succeed within the next two decades in imposing a mythopoeic surrealism as the language of Canadian poets, where then will be the excitement and the glamour of the language of scientific description and the techniques of narrative verse displayed in Pratt's metrical lines?

Carman was a shy, sensitive, harmless man whom most people liked and few wished to hurt. Canadian literary criticism is the kindest in the world — kindest perhaps because Canadian critics are also writers and would be done by as they do. An attractive personality softened the force of the fall of Carman's reputation and possibly postponed it until after his death. Pratt has been gifted with an even more attractive personal character than Carman, and he has for at least thirty years had intimate and influential contact with those who have the greatest means and prestige at their disposal for the raising of a literary reputation. Few critics in Canada today, even if they felt like doing so, would directly attack the poetry of E. J. Pratt. In the first place, such an attack would impugn the judgment of Canada's leading critics, men who have acclaimed Pratt as our one major poet; at the same time, such an attack might cause pain to a man whose integrity and warmth of character have made him a living legend. Pratt need therefore fear no direct attack during his lifetime upon his position as Canada's leading poet. Yet by the shifting of their grounds for praise of his work in recent

years, such critics as Sutherland and Dudek and, to a lesser extent, Frye and Pacey have shown not so much insight as their desire to supply in Pratt's poetry what currently seems necessary to be found in great poetry. The attempt to make the underlying symbols in Pratt's work — often fortuitous in their occurrence — its major ingredients marks the beginning of the pressure of changing problems, attitudes, and tastes upon an idol of a succeeding generation. The new faith first takes over the old idol and attempts to reshape it to its needs. Should it find the work of reshaping overly difficult, it will in time discard the idol altogether and regard it as a block of dead wood standing in the way of the true poetry. So it was with Carman. How will it be with Pratt? Despite the work of his recent admirers, Pratt does not seem to me to wear gracefully the robe of the Christian humanist scattering those mythopoeic symbols which prove the unifying vision that is at one and the same time the justification of poetry and the proof of the cleverness of the critic who first perceives them. My own feeling is that as soon as a genuine mythopoeic poet of stature emerges, efforts to make one of Pratt will cease, and much of his work will then, as Carman's is today, be consigned to the stony limbo of that which was not for all time but for an age.

IN VIEW OF some of the opinions expressed concerning the relative modernity of Carman and Pratt, it is a curious paradox that as an individual in relation to his age and as an artist in relation to his art, Carman is modern and Pratt is an anachronism, a mid-Victorian with an eighteenth-century practicality as a writer.

Modern poetry is *par excellence* the production of an internal proletariat, who axiomatically assume the superiority of the ideals of the individual (nonconformity) over the ideals of the crowd (conformity), and who put forward the thesis that the primary role of art and literature is to express personal experience rather than to put into more effective words socially accepted truths. In his attitude to poetry and to society, as far as the clarity of his expression and the depth of his experience allowed, Carman was typical of the internal proletariat. He missed greatness not by abandoning the struggle between personal and mass vision, between expressionism and functionalism in poetry, but by too easily assuming that he had won it. Neither the schizophrenia of "In the House of Idie-

daily" nor the sublimation of personal grief into the landscape were to prove a sufficiently firm and lasting bond between the poet and his readers.

From even the most cursory reading of Pratt's work, it becomes clear that he is the poet of all those in recoil from isolation — the poet of crowds over solitudes, of action over contemplation, of mass action over individual action, and that he accepts as basic and good a whole nexus of activities — instinctive and traditional — that are shared by men and animals as members of a species rather than possessed in isolation as individuals. It becomes equally clear that Pratt considers the writing of poetry to be functional craft in which the timeliness of topics, the consulting of monographs for accurate information, even the choice of metrical form, are affected by the classical function of providing pleasure and instruction to a co-operative audience. Out of this intelligent use of the details of craftsmanship and this careful consideration of his audience, Pratt in fact has achieved a technical success which had eluded English poets for upwards of two centuries. He successfully adapted the epic narrative to the deeds of modern man. Since this achievement is the only one by Pratt which is not equalized by the work of Carman or some other Canadian poet, it must be the rock upon which Pratt's greatness must ultimately rest. It therefore deserves more detailed scrutiny.

As early as the mid-seventeenth century, such writers as Sprat and Cowley had speculated concerning the possibility of turning man's material and commercial conquests over nature to poetical use. During the ensuing century a host of versifiers (of whom Armstrong, Young, Thomson, Grainger, and Dyer were most conspicuous) attempted the sagas of commerce and knowledge in Miltonic blank verse. They failed, partly through lack of imagination and partly through failure to cast their living subject matter into living language. Relying upon the intrinsic interest of their theme, these poets for the most part introduced human beings and their conflicts only cursorily into their poems glorifying modern materialism; hence the most essential elements of narrative poetry — human involvement and suspence — were lacking from their work. In style, they relied too heavily upon Latinized pseudonyms which had not yet become sufficiently absorbed into the fabric of the English language to be vital. At the same time, their use of epic imagery and machinery was too patently artificial and derivative to be effective. Moreover, Miltonic blank verse was too tortuous and languid a form to fit matter so positive as that of the new age. The dreary failure of these eighteenth-century poets was sufficient to discourage those who came after them, although both Wordsworth and Walt Whitman were to advocate strenuously the use of contemporary science and commerce as themes for great poetry. It was E. J. Pratt

who first showed the way for the effective employment in verse of modern commercial and scientific material and vocabulary.

Pratt succeeded where his predecessors had failed because he never lost sight of the human elements of suspense and conflict and accordingly made his matter of information not paramount in itself but subsidiary to the struggles which engrossed his readers' interest. Secondly, he substituted the language of scientific description (by this time a standard part of prose read by the educated) for the poetically outworn language of physical description. Thirdly, by a study of such good narrative poets as Dryden, Scott, and Byron, Pratt found a grammatical syntax and a metrical rhythm that suited the pace of his own age. As a result, Pratt's narrative poems restored for the first time since the eighteenth century the classic position of the poet as one who could express in verse with greater ease, lucidity, and grace, anything that fell within the providence of prose. Pratt's best work, therefore, is a superb achievement of technical genius, ranking with that of Dryden, whom among the English poets he most resembles. For no other Canadian poet can such a claim be made.

TECHNICAL PRE-EMINENCE is all the greatness that can be assigned to Pratt. Despite his topicality, and the care and attention which he gave to historical and scientific accuracy in the treatment of his themes, Pratt is, compared to a major English poet like Dryden, disappointingly limited. Here one feels that, like Jack London and Ernest Hemingway, he is the unwitting victim of obsessions born of his North American environment. North Americans have preserved and continued the Christian and classical traditions of European civilization; at the same time, most genuine and most deeply rooted in their behaviour are often attitudes of which they are seldom consciously aware — attitudes engendered by the realities of a recent (in Pratt's case, contemporary) frontier existence. The result of the interplay of European civilization with the influences of the frontier is the development of a psyche which unconsciously differs as greatly from its ostensible pattern as the Christianity of Saint Olaf differed from that of Jesus Christ and Saint Paul. Underlying Pratt's Christian ethics, his mid-Victorian code of honour, and his Wundtian psychology, and often rising up unconsciously and dominating his work, were the four great American obsessions: materialism, derived from generations of life-and-death

struggle with matter; hedonism, the assignment of value to matter; giantism, the measurement of matter; and infantilism, the arrested emotional development of man through a too engrossing concern with matter. Given these four primary obsessions, it is not surprising that any manifestation of the agency that manipulates matter, power, should appeal to Pratt's imagination like the presence of a god. To Pratt, a clash of power, whether between an iceberg and a ship or between great prehistoric monsters, has all the terror and delight of a *gotterdammerung*. In the Newfoundlander, Pratt, the last-born literary child of frontier America, the values of the primitive epic found unconsciously a belated second home.

The best test of the truth of the foregoing hypothesis can be seen in the climax of "Brébeuf and his Brethren". Few passages in civilized literature can match it for unrelieved amoral savagery and animalism. Brébeuf gives the Indians "roar for roar" like the ferocious and wounded animal he has become. They drink his blood and eat his heart, hoping by sympathetic magic therefore to imbibe his strength; he in turn gets superior strength, not from the symbols of civilization and religion, "lilies" and "words", but from the hallucinatory sound which the Indians cannot hear:

> . . . invisible trumpets blowing
> Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
> By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.

The "invisibility" of the trumpets, the sole spiritual note, is hardly sufficient here in itself to differentiate the Christ who presumably hung upon the Cross from the *geas* which primitive minds identify with lodestone iron and certain positions in which in magic ceremonies matter may be set up.

Pratt, then, combines a sophisticated and masterly poetic technique, a wealth of erudition, and a timeliness in choice of themes with an obsessive poetic vision that is almost incredibly primitive. Sometimes the blend succeeds; sometimes it fails. When it fails, one is left with a product essentially rococo — the senseless murders of "The Great Feud" or the academic whimsy of "The Witches' Brew" for example. When it succeeds, Pratt creates such masterpieces of narrative as "The Roosevelt and the Antinoë", "The Submarine", and "Behind the Log" — narratives in which the epic primitivism of the poet harnessed to his skill in the suspenseful depiction of action imposes Pratt's excitement upon many North Americans almost in spite of themselves. Pratt's work will never be popular in Europe. Whether it will maintain its popularity upon this continent as society

moves further and further in time and living conditions from its frontier origins is unlikely. My own feeling is that the curve of his literary reputation will be seen one hundred years from now to have curiously paralleled that of his predecessor, Bliss Carman.