

# E. J. PRATT'S FOUR-TON GULLIVER

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**D**EEP IN TORONTO a rebellious, gifted Newfoundlander sits eternally at the head of a table, a large cooked bird before him, congenial men around him and a promise of gradually warming, not essentially literary, talk to come. Once he addressed a book of his poems to “the boys of the stag-parties” almost as if, in evoking all those virile synods, he were amassing some counterweight to a bicepped image of his own in *The Cachalot*:

Out on the ocean tracts, his mamma  
Had, in a North Saghalien gale,  
Launched him, a four-ton healthy male,  
Between Hong Kong and Yokohama.

I resort to jocular vignette because Newfoundlanders, addicted to jocose tall stories and the convivial, still vehemently list Edwin John Pratt as the best of their several hundred outstanding poets. His main local competition comes, I think, from another master of the convivial whom I met in an outport: a poet of soil and soul who had one leg only, no wife, several children, a few animals, baked his own bread, cut the children's hair and when I last saw him was enlisting their aid to rear the walls of a new frame house. This game widower, very much a talking man, could give Pratt a run for his money as well as a new variant

of the healthy, several-ton male. Pratt's renowned conviviality implies this other man's view: a masculine, massive humanism fit to give any Newfoundland Methodist a spiritual embolism and yet epitomizing the earthiness and vitality for which Newfoundlanders are known and, in some cases, loved.

Born in a fishing village in 1883, the son of a Methodist clergyman, Pratt has made his life and career in Toronto but only after student preaching and elementary teaching in such settlements as Moreton's Harbour. He reached the University of Toronto in 1907 to study philosophy and psychology, was ordained in the Methodist ministry, and eventually in 1917 presented a doctoral thesis entitled *Studies in Pauline Eschatology*, a work he refuses to list among his publications (it was "done to a formula"). The poet did not emerge until 1925 in the characteristically titled collection, *Titans*. Methodism and academicism had to go; so also had the pedestrian tropes of the Newfoundland narrative poem, *Rachel*, the dusty truisms of his unpublished lyric drama, *Clay*, and the picturesque cutenesses of *A Book of Newfoundland Verse*. Once the inherited and acquired mental clutter had gone, he could cope with the story of the amphibian *tyrannosaurus rex* and the cachalot whale. He was reliving the days when he used to row out and watch the dead whales being moored belly-up at Moreton's Harbour. Much of the feeling in *The Cachalot*, as E. K. Brown pointed out, is "in the best sense, juvenile." It is also atavistic and exuberant, and Pratt's poetry in general has the same childlike quality, the same obsession with force, grandeur and immensity as boys' adventure stories. In Pratt's epics especially, we are alone in an empty room with God; or rather, God is alone with man because, for Pratt, good, godliness and gods have their only being in the human heart. To read his epics attentively, trying to respond to all those whales, icebergs, dinosaurs, giants and storms, is to attempt one's own studies in Prattian Eschatology: for these are *his* last things, far from those of St. Paul or of Newfoundland Methodism. And the *first* thing we have to get used to is Pratt's entranced addiction to spectacle, to conflicts in which the primitive defeats the civilized and force ingenuity. A certain huffing and puffing in his poems, as well as an absence of overt tenderness or clearly realized characters, produces an effect of impersonal olympianism. Call it allegory writ large or demiurge-dabbling, it is like Hardy crossed with Robinson Jeffers. And it is redeemed, as it has to be if we are not to feel alienated and irrelevant among his colossal icons, by two things: his humour, essentially that of Newfoundland plus immersion in literature, and the absence of terror. We can belly-laugh in the company of his icons and there is little need to whistle in his darkness. For his cosmology is weirdly genial; his universe isn't

mechanical so much as triumphant, and Pratt the preacher is still there, celebrating personally without regarding personal faces:

Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods,  
 The grey shape with the palaeolithic face  
 Was still the master of the longitudes.

Take it or leave it, that's what happened; where is the *Titanic* now? Pratt's relish for the defeat of human presumption has in it something perverse and oddly in conflict with his convivial streak.

The answer, I feel, has to do with disgust — not the sort of disgust we find in Penn Warren and Sartre (eructation and vomit; inevitable defeat, inevitable choice) but cosmic disgust at man's grandiose incapacity. Pratt displays an almost Jewish complicity with cosmic forces, and that image of the festive board with Pratt presiding — well, it's just a bit dynastic and Arthurian. Isn't it the humanist retort to the President of the Immortals, the obverse of Pratt's comic enthusiasm? To him, man is not big enough, not near enough to four tons; and the race itself strikes him as puny. This is why he seems at times, for all the muscle and weight of his language, a metaphysical flirt determined to be on the winning side and to celebrate men only when they are surpassing themselves on the verge of destruction. Of the many-faceted, teeming surface of civilization Pratt says little; he is addicted to apocalypse and titans. Even in his brilliant poem, "Come Away, Death", in which the words are granite-firm, there is more symbolism and analogue than circumstantial detail. But there *is* this, just the sort of thing the epics lack:

One night we heard his footfall — one September night —  
 In the outskirts of a village near the sea.  
 There was a moment when the storm  
 Delayed its fist, when the surf fell  
 Like velvet on the rocks — a moment only. . . .

There follows the typical Pratt expansion of the theme into maximum references:

What followed was a bolt  
 Outside the range and target of the thunder,  
 And human speech curved back upon itself  
 Through Druid runways and the Piltown scarp,  
 Beyond the stammers of the Java caves,

To find its origins in hieroglyphs  
On mouths and eyes and cheeks  
Etched by a foreign stylus never used  
On the outmoded page of the Apocalypse.

These grand properties can be tiring, not in a poem of sixty-odd lines like this, but when they recur like elephantine tapestries in the epics. (Pratt plays with archaeology and pre-history in much the same way as André Malraux does in his art books.)

IT MAY BE THAT PRATT, heir to a tradition of inbred, poor landscape poetry, has determined not to be Canadian: to sink the national in the prehistoric, the regional in the cosmic. His eschatology dwarfs and plunders his at-hand. His whale, unlike Melville's, is the incarnation of laudable natural strength. Pratt is less interested in depicting *mores* and human enterprises than in showing their futility. His iceberg thrills him more than the *Titanic's* passengers do (almost twenty are named in the poem). It is not the heroism that excites him so much as the spectacle of destruction: the consciously created, the man-made, wrecked by the unconscious cliff of ice. I find this excitement somewhat twisted although I sympathize with his underlying view of an impersonal universe surviving through a prearranged calculation of favourable chances. Most people were not on the *Titanic* anyway, and Life, numerically speaking, won over Death. It is as if Pratt, in Pleistocene *persona*, counted himself among the stalking ante-diluvians and cosmic colossi. Succumbing to such imaginative ambition, he prevents himself from doing what he claims to do: "to bring in with the more severe elemental qualities the human idiosyncrasies." It is not people that emerge, but simian mothers (as in *The Great Feud*) and impersonal bestiaries like Jeffers out of Fröst:

But goats, like men, have never found  
Much standing room on neutral ground.

After 1939 even, it is the *idea* of heroism rather than the feat of any individual that compels him to admire. And his admiration is, as it literally should be, full of sad wonderment. He has always been slow to glorify violent heroism, readier to

extol the passivity in stoicism, preferring always the impersonal violences of Nature. In *Dunkirk* no one fires at the enemy: all endure the process, as in "The Convict Holocaust" and *Brébeuf*. The net result is a tough surrender which resembles tough stalemate. In "The Truant" man puts God straight:

. . . we concede  
 To you no pain nor joy nor love nor hate,  
 No final tableau of desire,  
 No causes won or lost, no free  
 Adventure at the outposts. . . .

The lyric "Old Age" takes things a step further, expressing the *vita minima* in images like those of Yeats and Samuel Beckett: an old man, "so poor again, with all that plunder taken," has only "the round of a wheel chair and four dull walls." Yet the old man thinks he hears "silver horns blowing" up on the hills. For Pratt, man is doomed but, in accepting doom bravely, can be commensurable with Nature and God (who have no pain nor joy nor love nor hate) and even colossal, once we see things clearly. Man has consciously to undergo what plants and minerals undergo without consciousness. And beside man the cosmos is

A series of concentric waves which any fool  
 Might make by dropping stones within a pool.

The poker-game in *The Titanic* and the kaleidoscopic recipe in *The Witches' Brew* are cleverer than, both conceptually and verbally, than any cosmos. Or so it seems. Actually this is a bit of perverse pawnbroking. We have only to read something like Maurice Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee* to discount Pratt's disparagement of the ordered universe. Pratt says we can do anything better than the cosmos can; but this is to shunt off the cosmos as sour grapes. Better to shunt it off as too well organized to be tolerated. Because he feels this way — contemptuously envious, he feels no terror at either the vast spaces or their silence. And this is surely an inadequate response eloquent of some confusion in Pratt: after all, he who is fellow-traveller to titans ought not to disparage their route and footprints. E. K. Brown said that the reader never feels small in Pratt's world: "his pictures of strength release one from the petty round and make one feel the ally, not the victim . . . of universal power." The alliance flatters but, unless you accept Pratt's cosmography hook, line and sinker, turns us against ourselves, making *thanatos* out of *eros*.

Or does he mean, as Karl Menninger has suggested, that Man has an extraordinary propensity for self-destruction and rationalizes this by allying himself with destructive Nature? As Menninger asks, "Why does the wish to live *ever*, even temporarily, triumph over the wish to die?" In Pratt's poems, there is a colossal game going on of identification: Nature is both destructive and creative; if Man allies himself with Nature, then he is both too. But, in fact, Man is separate from Nature, and his own destructions and creations cannot chime exactly with those of Nature. Man bombs beautiful cities and massacres thousands in the process: if he claims Nature as an ally in this, he is trying to shift the blame. If he takes the blame and acknowledges he is a conscious being, then surely he is more vicious than Nature ever is. To wish to be as impersonal and inscrutable as Nature is to will our humanity away. And if Pratt means that we are indeed so wretched that we prefer not to be human, then his point has some force. But he would never celebrate its force; and what he does celebrate is something else. The kind of cosmic social-climbing he revels in means that Nature is powerless to inflict its worst without Man and Man, therefore indispensable, can work the arrangement in reverse by inventing spiritualities of his own: charity, courage, honour, love, congeniality over dinner. . . .

HERE WE MUST STOP. The Man-Nature argument is like that about the chicken and the egg, and it is jejune to debate their mutual inextricability until we regard it as an alliance. For the human mind is free to conceive of alliance or not; it can propound it or deny it. The question is open. Man is a conscious participant in a process from which he cannot divide himself, and all his interpretations, like the omega-point or whatever it is that Creation moves towards, are guesswork. But even guesswork is human, is brave; it's more inventive than being a vegetable. And Pratt's notion of martyrdom, covering what both Nature and Man do to men, begins with the decision to accept and develops with the impulse to justify. All this must, and does, provoke wry laughter of sorts: Man

Yoked Leo, Taurus and your team of Bears  
To pull his kiddy cars of inverse squares.

Pratt's humour is the safety-valve. Asserting Man against the cosmos, allying him

with the cosmos—this is work of supererogation and entails taking things seriously. Pratt, realizing this, as well as the futility of regimen and system, works human ingenuity against itself through polysyllabic, comic overtones:

You oldest of the hierarchs  
Composed of electronic sparks. . . .

His poetry is conceptual, allegorical and masculine. His lyricism is generic, not personal:

. . . and at the equinoxes  
Under the gold and green of the auroras  
Wild geese drove wedges through the zodiac.

It is the process of life — diurnal, chthonic, solar and chemical that obsesses him, and the only moral drama that attracts him is that of enduring until demolition. We must not look for people, not even such composites as we find in *The Waste Land*, because his whole tendency is generic — very much in the tradition of Pope's *Essay on Man* and Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*. All he declares is the power of the spirit and his conviction of spirit's constant availability.

He is the bleakest Canadian poet ever as well as the one with the fewest samples of contemporary society. Apocalyptic and full of sinew, he has virtually no foppery at all except that of titan-collecting. If he can be faulted for magniloquence and grandiosity he must be praised for making both qualities part of his protest against the forces that win so often he is tempted to side with them until Man measures up to the monolithic titan which merges iceberg, whale, dinosaur and ocean. Brébeuf the martyr is so huge that Indians are reluctant to let him into their canoes. Pratt, too, is a little monstrous, but our mental canoes get too many lightweights, and he must be received.

His mechanical-biological paraphernalia has enormous dignity within the confines of his hearty vision of the incongruous. The rare feat is to have sustained his own mythology without seeming to force the traditionally "poetic" into futile roles. He has demonstrated the fusing and modifying power of a vision, a vision not of streetfuls or trainfuls or housefuls, but pared and bleak, never squeamish or quixotic, always confidently nailed down and offered almost arrogantly. I think anti-Methodism has led him too far into cosmic solecisms and anti-philosophy has made him a bit of a simplifier; but he is after all the master of the Stonehenge style and the robustest apostate of all. The sea moans round him

too, with one voice only, and he stared at it for many of his formative years. It would be undiscerning, then, not to remark a Newfoundland tenacity and toughness, as well as the sense of maritime disaster, pervading his work. For his is essentially primitive verse written across the full sweep of an erudite man's vocabulary and the harshest tensions of an agile, dogmatic mind. He has been there, staring at the sea from Toronto for almost sixty years; and it is still, as his poetry tells us, staring densely back. The momentum of the tragic vision has sustained him as it has sustained few Canadian writers, and that in the long run is why Pratt has to be compared with, contrasted with, such as Milton and Verga. He is not quite of their measure, but he *is* comparable, and there has been no poet in Canada remotely as profound.

