

ILLUSION AND AN ATONEMENT

E. J. Pratt and Christianity

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NORTHROP FRYE, Desmond Pacey, and John Sutherland, three important Canadian critics, suggest in their comments on E. J. Pratt that Christianity forms the basis of his work: "His religious [i.e. Christian] views organize his poetry"¹; "Christ's self-sacrificing death on the Cross forms . . . the chief symbolic centre" of the poetry.² These interpretations seem, unfortunately, to be based more on the assumption that, because Pratt's doctoral dissertation was entitled *Pauline Eschatology*, his poetry is Christian, rather than on a thorough analysis of Pratt's poems. A Christian interpretation of Pratt's work is, I believe, erroneous; but even if such interpretation could be reasonably upheld it would be too limiting to the intent of his poetry; only ten of a total of ninety-eight poems in *The Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt* can in any way be construed as being Christian. Of the long, major poems, only *Brébeuf and His Brethren* is, surely and only through careless reading, open to pro-Christian interpretation.

As I have suggested, too little reasonable and thorough analysis has gone into most Pratt criticism.³ The most fantastic comments on Pratt are in John Sutherland's *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt: A New Interpretation*. Two examples should suffice. Sutherland sees the whale in *The Cachalot* as the "piscine symbol" of Christ, as the fulfilment in Christ of the "Messianic prophecy" in Ezra:⁴

. . . thou didst see a man coming up from
the heart of the sea. . . .

This in spite of the fact that the whale is described in the poem as the greatest killer in all the oceans. He says of *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, in *The Great Feud*, that he, too, is a symbol of Christ, because he “Rises above the petty allegiances of the other animals” and because he “voluntarily accepts the fact of his death: he appears to sacrifice himself to a higher principle.”⁵ The conventional image of Christ is hardly compatible with a creature who on the morning of the pleiocene Armageddon is

... bloated, angry and unsound
Of wind and reeling down the height
For flesh, his object of the fight.

Pacey comes near to fantasy. He dubs Pratt a Christian humanist because, in part, his poetry reveals that “Man glorifies God by seeking to emulate the sacrificial life of Christ.”⁶ It is strange that Pratt should expect men to glorify the God who, throughout his poetry, is completely without care for men; who is, indeed, amoral; and who is more like a Great Machine than anything else.

I hope that the following analyses of some of Pratt’s important poems will help to suggest a broader and more accurate view of what Pratt’s poetry is about.

SINCE “The Toll of the Bells” (1923), in which the poet’s faith is “raked up . . . and burned like a pile of driftwood”, E. J. Pratt has viewed as illusionists those who look with hope to God and to a divine, miraculous Christ, and with pride to systems that condone self-destruction for non-humanitarian ideals. Men, Pratt says, look in the wrong direction, away to the Deity, to systems, to Nature, rather than into themselves, to the defiant⁷ heart.

Pratt views Christ not as divine, but as the perfection of natural evolution in man (“The Highway”). Christ is no more sacrificing than the men of *Behind the Log* who die oil-anointed in the Arctic Ocean, and no more loving than those exemplary men of “Newfoundland Seamen” whose “master passion” is

Of giving shelter and of sharing bread,
Of answering the rocket signals in the fashion
Of losing life to save it.

Christ is the symbol of man eternally sorrowing, of man betrayed into death by other men, of man extending his greatest charity — his life for others.

Surrounded by death in the amoral universe, men are pathetically frail and small. Their spirit, however, rises above their physical insignificance when charity and defiance of death for the sake of life on earth find expression. In charity and defiance is immortality; there is no Heavenly immortality for men in Pratt: there is nothing beyond the death-sea.

The Iron Door (An Ode), published in 1927, is Pratt's earliest, most complete expression of a sense of the illusion of belief in Christian Afterlife. In the poem, the poet dreams that he sees an iron door in a cliff by the sea. Clouds of fog surround it, admitting occasional gleams of light. The door is in the shape of a cross, and on its lintel is "the crest/ Of death". Before the door stand the souls of the dead, most of whom question the purpose of life. Eventually, the door opens, but only widely enough for the poet to see that the petitioners pass through it. He sees nothing beyond the door, although he catches the "sense" of light, life, and space beyond. The poet awakens from his dream, profoundly affected by its meaning.

Pratt's description of the door and its surroundings, at the beginning of the poem, indicates the direction that the poem will take. The door has been made by a "giant hand" which brought it from "some Plutonian cave". These suggestions of myth are intensified by the presence of "death's crest" placed over the door in "ironic jest", as if death were teasing those before the door with the suggestion that there is something beyond it.

The door has no latch, and it will open only once for the poet:

It seemed the smith designed it to be swung
But once, then closed forever more.

The air surrounding the desolate area is filled with the music of the sorrows of mankind, and is associated with a human desire for belief that death is not the end of life. The music suggests that in crises and "drab hours" does the need for belief arise — a need that gives birth to dreams that are more glorious than heaven could be. The door is, finally, a mirror of the faces before it; that is, it is constituted of men's despair.

Those whose faces materialize before the door are men and women whom the poet has known. Some have given up their lives for others; a sea-captain enquires after the status of honour and courage in the land of death; a child mourns the

death of his dog; the poet's mother (apparently) is there, calm and without doubt that further life ensues; a cynic, whose need is apparent in his dejection, is prepared to accept that the "whole cosmic lie [is] pre-disposed".

At the "darkest moment" the door opens for the petitioners. The poet does not know what causes it to open and presents several possible forces: some talisman, a "wish thrice-spoken", a magic name, or unreasoning faith. There is no apparent logic to the door's opening, and faith and magic are equally effective. The logic is, of course, that the door opens because those who create it can do with it as they wish: the door is the petitioners' own illusion, and their further illusion will see it opened.

The poet, however, cannot participate in the revelation of the Afterlife. He can only "sense" the vision beyond the door; he can participate only to the extent of appreciating what the dead believe they are going to. He cannot see beyond the threshold. The souls pass through, the door slams shut, and although the desolate clouds of death return to him, as potent as ever, the poet, *in spite of death*, clings to the meaning of the dream: for his Afterlife is illusion.

The poem concludes with a reversal of the conclusion of Milton's sonnet, "Methought I Saw . . ." Pratt's conclusion is:

. . . I was left alone, aware
Of blindness falling with terrestrial day
On sight enfeebled by the solar glare.

Milton's awakening returns him to a literal condition of blindness in which the return of day only temporarily impairs his dream-sight. Pratt's awakening completes a figurative process begun before the dream began (his dream-sight has already been "enfeebled"). The coming of day renders him permanently blind to apprehending Christian Immortality. The door, as suggested at the beginning of the poem, will open no more for him. The unpitying glare of reason will not permit him the solace of unreasoned belief.

Pratt's rejection of the belief in the Afterlife is related to his rejection of the concept of the moral universe: God is unheeding of man; it is His winds that in "The Ground Swell" feed the hungry death-sea with men, and it is His ears in *The Iron Door* that are "unhearing" of the pleas of suffering and confused humanity existing in a world dominated by death. God is defined in "The Truant" as the mechanical force of the universe, the Great Panjandrum who is scarcely aware of mankind. Yet it is man who has made this disinterested force into a deity, an attestation of man's superiority over God:

Boast not about your harmony,
 Your perfect curves, your rings
 Of *pure and endless light* — 'Twas we
 Who pinned upon your Seraphim their wings,
 And when your brassy heavens rang
 With joy that morning while the planets sang
 Their choruses of archangelic lore,
 'Twas we who ordered the notes upon their score
 Out of our winds and strings.

The Roosevelt and the Antinoë, which is the climax of Pratt's poetry of the conflict of man and nature, embodies the illusory nature of the benevolent God and the miraculous, divine Christ. During the storm in which the crew of the wrecked *Antinoë* is rescued by the *Roosevelt* two men are drowned. The crew of the *Roosevelt* gather on the deck to acknowledge, through religious service, the heroism of the drowned men. Their bandages and slings proclaiming their efforts against the snow, wind and sea, they hear the hymn which in the howls of the wind is only partially audible. It is obscured at other times by the voice of the amoral universe, of God, that laughs "down the ventilating shaft". The hymn that the mourning sailors hear, however, informs them that it is God who commands the seas, which obey Him. He is, further, a "*father to the fatherless*", and the "*God of all comfort*". But God, in fact, is no comfort, for he has brought the two sailors to the "bellies" of the waves, the fanged "creatures of a fabled past", and the men lie not with God the Father, but in "the sea's stern foster-lap". The crew are deluded. Their father and comfort is the one who will have them destroyed. They are blind to the irony of their worship.

The futility of the illusion of the beneficent God is focused not only in the crew and the hymn, but also in the Roman Catholic priest who raises his crucifix to the sea, giving absolution to the dead men, and who prays for God's help. That which the priest begs is a "crumb/ Of favour" from the storehouse of God's goodness, which is a "cupboard" that still has much in it despite the many demands that have been made on it: a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Omnipotent. That the priest is sincere is not in doubt, but his gesture is impotent: the eventual rescue is the result of chance and men's willingness to respond with emotion and reason to the needs of other, to respond with "the heart's assent unto the hand". God has nothing to do with the success of the venture: the ray of sunlight, after the rescue has been made, breaks through the clouds and defies the rescuers; "As

if a god might thus salute the deed" repudiates God as the source of the praise. The mission was accomplished in spite of Him.

The image of the priest with his crucifix upraised to the raging Atlantic is balanced by an image of Christ quietening Galilee. The comparison between the two bodies of water reveals that the Atlantic is "no Gennesaret of Galilee" which had been quietened by "conjuring", by a "word's magic". The denigration of Christ's miracle as illusion — and, consequently, His divinity — reveals the Catholic priest's symbolic acts as futile and pathetic. The terrible frailty of man, and his need to find sustenance against death, are thus dramatically underlined.

P RATT'S GREAT EPIC, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, expresses the theme of illusion through the misguided efforts of the Jesuit priests in seventeenth-century Canada. The Jesuits teach abstractions that bring nothing to vast majority of Indians: it is illogical to desire a Paradise in which there will be starvation because there can be no hunting; in which friends and enemies will exist side by side; in which there will not be the comforts of tobacco and feasts. The Jesuits' response to the Indians' lack of response is to impress on them another abstraction, Eternal Torment, the threat of the torture-fires which place the priests' persuasive techniques in an infinitely worse category than the Indians'. The priests are so concerned with the "will of God", with Paradise and Hell, with the welfare of souls, and with the attainment of martyrdom, that the charity and kindness — expressions of human feeling — with which they initially approached the Indians take second place. Ironically, the priests' flaming zeal brings forth not warmth from the Indians, but the cold of death from burning pitch, blazing forts, and fires at the stake.

The Jesuits in the poem must subject "*Desire and sense . . . to the reason*" and must "trample the body under". Reason, not the heart, will lead them to their goal, the attainment of "Loyola's mountains. . . / Sublime at their summits". Their mutilated bodies are only indications to them of the nearness of their goals of martyrdom; they are manifestations of their self-centred devotion to the Code, to which their humanity is subjugated. They are machines of Reason, and in their pursuit of martyrdom, are unwitting agents of death, victims of the illusion that their system has value to man.

In Brébeuf himself the tragedy of the Jesuits is most apparent. He is a poten-

tially great human being who has gentleness, kindness, nobility of character and background, courage, and strength, who gives his life for his ideal, God, through the auspices of the Jesuit Order. He seeks martyrdom, death, for an ideal and through a system that deny the humanity of men. The proper business of men, in Pratt, is the pursuit of life, not death. Brébeuf dies in ignorance of the futility of his ideal.

The well-known image of the cross which climaxes Brébeuf's illusion is a magnificent statement by Pratt of the tragedy of illusion. The Indians search for the source of Brébeuf's strength. They tear out his heart, but it is not there. It is

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

Brébeuf's strength is in the "sound of trumpets", which may be heavenly, but which has nothing of humanity in it. Nor have the "two slabs of board" around which the trumpets blow. The music, the trumpets, the boards, and the "Roman nails" are cold. As the mystical nature of Brébeuf's mission is removed from humanity, and as the logic of his Christian direction is cold, so is his martyrdom. The source of Brébeuf's strength is in the self-glorification signified by the sound of the trumpets, which like the seraphim in "The Truant" and the land of light in *The Iron Door* are created by men themselves.

The ideals for which the Jesuits strive require the subjection of their humanity to Reason and religious spirit. Brébeuf would, for example, react emotionally to the lack of privacy among the Indians with whom he lived — and to all the annoyances of Huronia — but he hides his human reaction and transforms "hoary Gallic oaths/ Into the *Benedicte*". At the climax of the poem, he does assert himself, momentarily in his agony, when he rebels against the Indians' torture which will bring about his end. He gives them

... roar for roar.
 Was it because the chancel became the arena,
 Brébeuf a lion at bay, not a lamb on the altar ... ?

But he subsides again into the passive rôle of the martyr. When he roars out, Brébeuf acts in the manner that Pratt describes in "Silences", by which the first step to salvation is through communication of emotion, "for who would not prefer to be lustily damned than to be half-heartedly blessed?" The torture by fire and boiling water are the fulfilment of his conscious wish to die "*per ignem*

et per aquam" and to take his place in "the line of martyrs". The Indians are vehicles for the attainment of "Loyola's summits".

The virtues of the Indians, which are eventually forgotten in their desire to rid the country of the Jesuits, are epitomized in two converts, Eustache and Onnonhoaraton, whose actions are contrasted to those scarcely human Jesuits, Joques and Goupil. Eustache, at the Iroquois stake, pleads with his friends

*... to let no thought of vengeance
Arising from his anguish at the stake
Injure the French hopes for an Iroquois peace...*

Onnonhoaraton offers himself as a sacrifice in place of Joques. The concern of these two Indians is with life through peace and the charity of self-sacrifice so that others may live. The Jesuit Joques, at the same "festival of torture", uses his last energies to baptize two prisoners "with the dew from leaves of Turkish corn", and to give them the sign of the "last absolution". Goupil is killed (by a sorcerer) when he tries to place the sign of the cross on a child's forehead. The concern of the priests is with the acceptance of death; their symbolic actions are vapid in comparison with those of the two Indians, which affirm life.

In the epilogue, "The Martyr's Shrine", Pratt switches the setting to twentieth-century Canada, and indicts contemporary Canadians on three counts of illusion. Pratt begins the epilogue with a reiteration of the phrase "the winds of God" with which the poem begins. The seventeenth-century winds brought men from the safety and quietude of uninvolved lives in religious institutions in France to the wilderness of Canada to face the ravages of weather and the violence of "prejudiced minds", to build forts, and to scale the heights of "Loyola's mountains". Twentieth-century Canadian winds can only rouse men to provide a shrine on a hilltop approached by highways, near Midland, Ontario. The indictment is bitter: those who provide the shrine are pallid beside those they honour: the French Jesuits may have been misguided, but they had the strength of determination to accept a great challenge. The shrine is a valueless thing because it commemorates the wrong thing — the self-pride of the Jesuits functioning under the illusion of the values of Reason and self-destruction, rather than the tremendous determination of which human beings are capable.

Men do not recognize the follies of the past. The illusions of the seventeenth century arise for the "ashes of St. Ignace", which are "glowing afresh". The candles in the shrine are lit "from the torch of Ragueneau's ruins". But candle

flames are only pale imitations of the zealous, ancient flames. Burned St. Ignace is still only ashes; the ashes glow but will never burn. The forest trails over which the priests travelled are now modern highways, the dubious blooms of "fern/ And brier and fungus". The final two lines of the poem,

The shrines and altars are built anew; the *Aves*
And the prayers ascend, and the Holy Bread is broken,

are a last, almost wearied, comment on the illusion of those responsible for the shrine and on the illusion which the shrine perpetuates.

BESIDES WRITING of religious illusion, Pratt deals with men's illusions of Nature and of their own capabilities, especially as manifested in their machines. The chief poem which deals with these themes is *The Titanic*, but "The Sea Cathedral" and "The Mirage", two short poems, provide a basis for Pratt's concept that beauty in Nature is deceptive in its suggestions of spiritual significance. Beauty in Nature must, because it is not of man, pass meaninglessly away. The iceberg in "The Sea Cathedral", although "fairer than a Phidian dream", is doomed to be drawn down by the "inveterate sea" into nothingness, because it is not a product of man. Its beauty is only "immaculate". It is a show piece of nature that is temple-like but is

Without one chastening fire made to start
From altars built around its polar heart.

Similar imagery of the illusion of Nature as an expression of beatitude is present in "The Mirage". A cloud structure there is described as religious imagery that suggests that the cloud has religious significance. In the light of the poet's intellect, however, the cloud loses its value. It is only a thing of Nature; it has no "lineage of toil"; it has no contact with man.

The iceberg in *The Titanic* presents the illusion of moral significance in Nature, of having transcendent value (and John Sutherland was one critic who suffered from the illusion).⁸ There are two aspects to the imagery of the iceberg, its empty beauty and its ugliness, which are conveyed in images of a religious and a somewhat scientific nature, respectively. The religious images are in the pattern of those in "The Sea Cathedral" and "The Mirage". The iceberg of *The Titanic* has

. . . façade and columns with their hint
Of inward altars and of steepled bells
Ringing the passage of the parallels.

As the iceberg melts, it loses “the last temple touch of grace”. Underlying the appearance of the temple is ice of the “consistency of flint” that has been pressed by “glacial time”. The “paleolithic face”, into which the temple deteriorates and “shambles like a plantigrade”, is no different, basically, from the beautiful iceberg. Both appearances are accidents of climate; there is no opposition between the “façade and columns” and the “paleolithic face”. Both are merely aspects of amoral nature. The iceberg is the same thing both before and after the sun has changed its appearance: underlying its superficial beauty is its destructive potential.

The ship, the *Titanic*, is itself a mechanical universe of illusion. It has its own stars; its lights turn night into day; its machinery is, in effect, self-running; it has its own deities, the first-class gods whose materialism creates commercial wonders. But there is nothing attractive about the ship. It is grotesque, and man has let himself be displaced by it. He has made himself a god in his creation of the ship and will not demean himself with running her: there is scarcely anyone “behind the log”. To the passengers, the ship has the safety of land. On the decks there is light from a “thousand lamps as on a city street”; palm trees line an avenue “With all the vista of a boulevard”. The ship is a crag, a Gibraltar. This vulgar bauble is men’s universe, and faith in her is absolute: “Even the judgment stood in little need/ Of reason”.

Specifically, the lights of the ship symbolize man’s vanity and the illusion of his greatness. Even after the collision with the iceberg, many passengers cannot realize their danger. As the lifeboats lower into the water, those in them find the necessity of the descent unreal. For them the ship is still secure; the lights burn invitingly — they are the stars of the universe that man has created; they have superseded the stars of the natural universe. The lights illumine and are a part of many of those pretentious aspects of the *Titanic* that make her great in men’s eyes: the boulevards, the palm trees, the saloons in Regency and the taste of the “Louis dynasty”. The lights illumine her gigantic size, “From gudgeon to stem nine hundred feet”. Even the light from cigarettes gives confidence, as the men stand, elegantly dressed, against the glow of the ship after the iceberg has ripped a three-hundred foot gash in her:

. . . the silhouettes
Of men in dinner jackets staging an act
In which delusion passed, deriding fact
Behind the cupped flare of the cigarettes.

Dramatically the listing *Titanic* glows on the ocean, a pathetic creation, contrasting to the stars, but to the last turning night into day. But it is light that "cheats" and "beguiles". Safety on the big ship is an illusion which many passengers choose in preference to the safety of the lifeboats; the light is an irony of security:

Inside the recreation rooms the gold
From Arab lamps shone on the burnished tile.
What hindered the return to shelter while
The ship clothed in that irony of light
Offered her berths and cabins as a fold?

When the stern of the ship lifts "Against the horizon stars in silhouette", the eternal and the temporary and illusory are posed against each other. The ship's lights flash off and then on, and the terrible reality of destruction strikes. Without her lights, the *Titanic* becomes a part of the night that she had vainly tried to displace, a part of the Void, that "jet expanse of water", her black grave.

But not all of the passengers on the *Titanic* remain under the illusion that men's strength can displace the universe. In the face of death, realizing the predicament of the ship, many of the first-class passengers perform a deliberate ritual of self-sacrifice. The half-empty lifeboats going down without the gods are symbols that man's illusion has been atoned for. These men and women have *chosen* to let the boats go unfilled. They have rejected any desire for survival; they have accepted death. Theirs is a conscious decision to be sacrificed to atone for "That ancient *hubris* in the dreams of men". And Man thereby is redeemed. But Pratt is too realistic to say that because Man is redeemed from the illusion of his strength all men are: hundreds who believe in the efficacy of the ship's lights go down, but their screams are unheard in the roar of great machines tearing loose below decks as the ship's stern rises to a 45° angle.

But if, in the lifeboats surrounding the vacancy where once floated the *Titanic*, men are implied as rising from the desolation of their illusion, so in the image of the "icy broods" ringing the remaining iceberg is implied the continuation of vast power of the amoral universe.

For Pratt, what men must understand is that their salvation lies in themselves,

not in Nature, God, systems, or in ignorant pride in machines. To maintain life should be the end of men's actions, the accomplishment of which, in times of conflict, is dependent on defiance, determination, and Reason under the control of the heart. But illusions persist: men kill men, die for ideals which embrace death, and delude themselves with hopeful prayers addressed to the "unhearing ears of God". Imperfect men must make direct their feelings for other men for the sake of life. For life is, finally, all that men have, and only men can care at all whether men live or die.

Notes

- ¹ Northrop Frye, "Editor's Introduction", *The Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt*, 2nd. ed. (Toronto, 1958), xxiii.
- ² Desmond Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets* (Toronto, 1958), p. 175. Here Pacey is agreeing with Sutherland's thesis, presented throughout *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt: A New Interpretation* (Toronto, 1956).
- ³ The notable exception is Earle Birney's "E. J. Pratt and His Critics", in *Masks of Poetry* (Toronto, 1962), pp. 72-95.
- ⁴ p. 69.
- ⁵ p. 103.
- ⁶ *Ten Canadian Poets*, p. 175.
- ⁷ *Defiance* is Earle Birney's designation of the most significant of human values in Pratt's poetry: "E. J. Pratt and His Critics", *Masks of Fiction* (Toronto, 1962), p. 90.
- ⁸ In *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt: A New Interpretation*.