E.J. Pratt: Apostle of the Techno/Corporate Culture?

by R.D. MacDonald

In "Apostle of Corporate Man," Frank Davey notes Pratt's fascination with "raw material power" and with the "gods" of the corporate world—"organization, planning, regimentation, efficiency, discipline and order" (56-57). He argues that as Pratt admires "heroic collective action" of any kind—whether it be that of a Christian nation or a national railroad or an Allied war effort or even a Nazi submarine mission—he becomes an "uncritical spokesman for the values of industrial man" (65). In "E.J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician," Davey sees a propagandist standing over and above his literary materials, "an authoritarian craftsman . . . forging a specific effect" and "superimposing an intellectualized structure on reality" (66-67), fabricating rather than discovering reality, reducing "complex" historical realities, and concealing his own "private responses" or any hint of "ignorance or ambiguity or mystery" (71). The imposed ideology is supposedly that of a "Pelagian" liberal or humanist who believes not only that original sin can be cast out but that "the machinery of technology and the machinery of social organization [are] man's best way to salvation" ("Apostle of Corporate Man" 65)—that "any difficulty" can be overcome by "social co operation, discipline, vigilance, the application of reason, and the suppression of individualism" ("Rationalist Technician" 77).

Desmond Pacey shows a similar generalizing or hypermetropic perspective while considering historical influences upon Pratt's writing. Under the influence of Wilhelm Wundt's *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, Pacey's Pratt reduces the human mind to a "nervous mechanism" (*Ten Canadian Poets* 171), and he presents man's war machines in terms of "gigantic mechanical monsters and birds of prey . . . nightmare creatures of the new but ancient barbarism" (191). Against this background, however, Pacey also sees Pratt turning toward a "joyous life of spontaneous energy" (173) and toward that most highly evolved man, Christ, "the true apocalypse, the supreme revelation of the divine purpose: the way of sacrificial love" (193)—the way of "courage, compassion and courtesy" (182). Unfortunately, the alliterated patness of this conclusion detracts from Pacey's more complex recognition of the "tissue thin," the disturbingly close and living relation, the ongoing and conflicting relation between our civilized and primitive being. Pacey's neatness of thought finally throws out of focus the bristling and unsettled edges and energies of Pratt's writing and Pratt's heroes.

I find a similar reductiveness in many of Pratt's critics. John Sutherland sees in Pratt's writing a conflict between "consciousness and subconsciousness . . . between a creative and destructive impulse in man himself" (*John Sutherland: Essays, Controversies and Poems* 175). Like Pacey, Sutherland easily resolves this dialectic into a "dominant emotion . . . [a] strong Christian element [of] compassion . . . which the poet regards as heroic" and "most fundamental" (175). A.J.M. Smith sees a similar "fusion of the Demoniac and Heroic" into "compassion" and "harmony" by means of irony: "Irony gives Pratt's poetry its intellectual tang: what humanizes it and gives it its final calm is compassion" ("A Garland for E.J. Pratt" 82). Earle Birney, however, insists upon the struggle itself and emphasizes Pratt's high heroic role as epic narrator

courageously confronting the chaos and decline of his era, not retreating to some remote high-wire lyricism but taking on the “whole circus” with a “ringing authenticity of passion” (“E.J.Pratt and his Critics” 93). Henry W. Wells and Carl F. Klinck transform Pratt’s compassion into militaristic self-sacrifice: their Br閲euf, a Jesuit soldier of Christ, shows, in Pratt’s own words, “the iron in the human soul” (“Men, Tools and Machines” 96). Here Pratt’s poetry expresses “the great cultural problem of our age: the relation of man, compounded of flesh, blood, nerves and thoughts, to his cold and impersonal machines” (183). Pratt’s “Submarine,” then, “relentlessly take[s] the soft cover off the guns to reveal the menace of the hard steel itself” and “savour[s] the infamous and dehumanizing powers of the machine, almost as much in evidence in peace as in war” (188-89). Unlike Frank Davey, Wells and Klinck do not question whether Pratt’s detachment may itself be symptomatic of the technological age—whether Pratt simply fails to think beyond the prevailing mindset and mythology.

The “ground tone” that Louis Dudek hears in Pratt’s poetry is not compassion but “the beat of pistons, the metallic clangour of wheels and the apparently unreflective energy of matter” (“Poet of the Machine Age” 93-94). Dudek feels “a peculiar kind of energy, a physical drive, a mechanical exuberance” (89). In Pratt’s cachalot and kraken, Dudek observes “naked, natural appetite unmodified by moral considerations” (89), immense destructive powers running in a straight line to the “irrational violence of the Second World War and . . . the Machine Age as a whole” (92). Dudek finds Pratt’s perspective oddly “truncated” and “circumscribed” (94). This peculiarity of perspective is also noticed by Vincent Sharman who sees a similar Machine at the heart of Pratt’s nature, an uncaring and amoral God “who is more like the Great Machine than anything else” (“Illusion and Atonement: Pratt and Christianity” 110). Here Sharman moves Pratt’s Christian compassion front and centre but demystifies the sacred base as Christ becomes the highest example of courageous self-sacrifice in mankind.

In “Silence in the Sea,” Frye dwells upon Pratt’s long view of nature’s unending vastness, “the mindless, pointless world of wheeling stars and crashing seas” operating aeons long before and still operating throughout the minuscule human present. Over and against this naturalistic world, however, Frye sees an “enduring, resisting and suffering Christ of Gethsemane” who is “the Son of Man” (134). Pratt himself becomes to Frye a throwback to a primitive oral culture, a poet speaking in a “dry impersonal voice” (124- 25), speaking “for as much as to his audience” (127)—his political views, like “those of an ordinary conservative citizen who reads his morning paper and believes, on the whole, what it says” (130).

I question whether Pratt is this uncritically conservative and conventional spokesman. Where in Pratt’s “Silences” Frye hears “a moral chaos in which the creative word has not yet been spoken, the word of the conscious mind able to detach itself from a life wholly engaged in predatory aggression and [able to] see and judge what it is doing” (134-35), I read a more disturbing possibility—two *all too-conscious* adversaries. Surely Pratt’s poem works in the tradition of Blake’s “Poison Tree” and Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*: it exposes a civility that contains and transforms anger into a toxic poison. I also question Frye’s assumption that Pratt expresses the modern myth of liberation, the “new myth[] where the hero is man the worker rather than man the conqueror, and where the poet who shapes those myths is shaping a human reality greater than the whole objective world, with all its light-years of space, because it includes the infinity of human desire” (138). As for Frye’s confident handling of Pratt’s “Newfoundland”—where he sees irony or fatalism displaced by a “vision of unquenchable energy and limitless endurance” in the interchange of the sea and mankind (138)—I would argue that Pratt does not find these infinite longings and

vast aeons liberating. It would be as accurate to say that Pratt shows our 'titanic' longings to be not infinite but infantile, for these longings are also the origin of our suffering—of our short-term triumphs and binges—in a vastness that never releases us from our small margin of safety.

D.G. Jones and George Whalley make a just estimate of Pratt's naturalism—in Jones' phrase—the "elemental energies of wind and tide flow[ing] into human life" (*Butterfly on Rock* 112). Jones observes Pratt's detached or "impersonal sympathy," a "large and almost passionless irony" toward an unreflecting humanity—and with this, Pratt's fear that man "may reflect but not profoundly . . . [that man] may use his freedom only to increase his strength" and thereby become the unwitting victim of the "irrational and unconscious currents" that run through the sea and through our own being (114-16). Both Jones and Whalley see man's triumphs arising, then, not from a "defiant assault" against nature but through an imaginative "merging and a fusing" of human ways to the ways of nature (Jones 119). Whalley contends that Pratt's fondness for technology starts from the linking and projecting powers of the human imagination—the recognition of a potential oneness in the human and natural worlds: thus machines and engineering projects here become extensions or projections of man's capacities and senses. Here while the whale may be a "marvellous piece of engineering" and the submarine a "biological masterpiece" ("Birthright to the Sea" 186), the machine that "cease[s] to be an extension of man" becomes a "pitiless instrument" that draws us down to a lower nature—for "cruelty can make a shark of man" (196). In Pratt, himself, however, Whalley finds an answering potency, a masculinity not only "courageous, enduring, strong and skillful, but also . . . compassionate, patient, self-sacrificing, unassuming, hospitable, reticent, knowing that we share at times delight and accomplishment, and certainly we share suffering and loss" (196).

Obviously, this catalogue has little in common with Frank Davey's version of Pratt as the corporate man. It is also far removed from the perspective of Pratt's contemporaries, the reactionary modernists of the Third Reich, who celebrated "trains as the embodiment of the will to power or [who] saw the racial soul expressed in the *Autobahn*" (Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* 13), who took the "explosion of grenades [to be] the external expression of inner impulses toward life . . . some *Ding an Sich* immune to rational description" (34). This kind of "steely romanticism", this notion of a nation or a generation as a closed fraternity sharing a "great mission" and immune to "bourgeois and feminine refinements" and "beyond pain" (Herf 73-75, quoting Junger's "Battle as an Inner Experience") has little to do with Pratt's holistic vision. Working from J.C. Smut's *Holism and Evolution*, Sandra Djwa argues that Pratt's presentation of the Canadian Pacific Railway advancing through the Rockies "recapitulates . . . the evolutionary development of life itself—from inanimate matter, through 'worm casts' to man" (123). She argues that Smut's philosophy of holism showed Pratt an evolutionary "'process which fundamentally moulds all life and history'" and leads to "co-operative regroupings of smaller states into larger structures such as the proposed United Nations" (*E.J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision* 122-23). This meliorism has little to do with Davey's carpings about Pratt's being the spokesman of techno/corporate culture and even less to do with the heroic activism, the "steel romanticism" of the Second World War. Pratt's hopeful vision includes neither an "unlimited domination over nature," nor a fundamental transformation of "the naturally constituted existences of men" (Here I use the phrases of Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* [78] as quoted in Herf, 120). Such belief in technological progress is repeatedly punctured by Pratt's ironic asides, by his overview of our vulnerability before the gigantic caprices of nature.

What differentiates Pratt's vision from this "steely romanticism," these masculine celebrations of a primal *geist*, of will and technology and nation? To answer this question properly, one must consider Pratt's poetic perspective, his syncretic vision of the biological/technological (sharks as killing machines and submarines as sharks), the difficulties of his impersonality (his dispassionate/compassionate perspective), his heroic ideal of self-sacrifice for the whole, and his conservative sense of the whole as a containing but shadowy matrix within which our 'free will' is exercised—but not fully liberated.

Pratt's 'soft' or 'tender' mindedness must not be overlooked. His poem, "A Call," for example, speaks in a caring voice like that of Blake's indulgent nurse in the *Songs of Innocence*. But where she lets the children play on into the darkness, Pratt's care-taker suddenly fears the sunlit tranquillity, the "peace invasions" of the lee shore, the charged air with its "load of clam and balsam smells like musk." Thus he (or she) attempts to call the children home. While the "blue eyed" children cannot see why, the speaker repeats his call, knowing that he "alone / Could penetrate that sign of rain, / The stalking thunder in that drone." He knows too that the daylight cannot be washed from the children's eyes. The final stanza denies memory of the momentary peace and affirms only the memory—the premonitory "cry,/ Unanswered still—Come home, come home" (*Complete Poems* 2:192). The very rhyme of "foam" and "home"— the suspension of any rhyme until the fourth line of each quatrain (abcb)—echoes the speaker's apprehension of a last minute but inevitable order realizing itself even as it brings destruction down upon humanity.

Pratt's poem "Myth and Fact" also explores our vulnerability in the daylit world. Resorting to the 'light' of reason, the parental figure tries to "exorcise" the children's nightmare fears raised by folk and fairy tales and classical myth—Jack the Giant Killer, Little Red Riding Hood, the tales of Medusa and Cyclops: "We sought to prove they could not literalize / *Jack* though the giant shook with laughter." Against the drift of the poem, however, apparently despite himself, the reassuring voice uncovers reason for anxiety in huge forces threatening to break out of the ordinary light of day. In this ironic overview, mankind never outgrows primal fears and powers:

> We had outgrown the dreams, outrung the knells
> Through voodoo, amulet and prayer
> But knew that daylight fastened on us spells
> More fearful than Medusa's hair.
>
> We saw the bat-companioned dead arise
> From shafts and pipes, and nose like beagles
> The spoors of outlaw quarry in the skies
> Whose speed and spread made fools of eagles.

This nightmare premonition arises from the 'advanced' technology of World War II buzz bombs and Cold War missiles. Even our outer senses seem to be expressed in terms of a turned-off Early Radar Warning System: "We shut our eyes and plugged our ears, though sound / And sight were our front-line defenses." Therefore the adult returns to the restorative powers of traditional myths and fairy tales, the willed "make-believe" by which the Cyclops can be killed and the giants and dragons can remain unmeasured: now the leaves of these books "furnish" the mind with an "[a]sylum in the foliage" (2:194). Here the horrors of the imagination are exceeded by what the actual "solar hounds in tally-ho / Could do when once they sniffed the pillows" (2:195). The poem ends then ostensibly where it began—in a prayer that imaginary truth with its fearsome powers preserve the child from

the daylight truth of reason with its even greater horrors.

It would be a mistake, however, to see this poem of the 1950s to be merely symptomatic of a late softening of heart—for Pratt's earliest poems dwell upon the suffering of the vulnerable, especially of women losing fathers, husbands and sons to the sea and war. From the beginning, grief is an index of the overwhelming and implacable powers of nature. For example, in "Rachel: A Sea Story of Newfoundland in Verse," Pratt unfolds the cycle of a widow's son growing up, feeling the call of the ocean, following the same course toward destruction as his father and grandfather. Here the heroic longings of the boy merge with the energies of the sea:

> He loved to stand and watch
> The white sea-horses racing down a storm,
> Hoofing with maddened glee the briny plains,
> Or after, when the wind had died, the flood
> Tumbling its waters through the narrow gulch
> That steamed and panted in the long embrace.
>
> (1: 24)

Later the boy transfigures the ocean into a cathedral "sanctuary of faith and sacrifice"—a treacherous illusion that Pratt plays upon in many of his poems:

> The waters were its organ notes that swelled
> With pomp of peal, and died with murmurous sound.
> The wide extreme of hurricane and breeze
> That swept the mighty key-boards of the main,
> With grounded gutturals of the reef and cape,
> Or drew with soft caress and lingering ease
> The lovely linguals of the coves, expressed
> Seaward passion of his bone and blood.
>
> (1:28)

But the poem dwells less upon the boy than upon the impact of his being lost at sea—i.e., upon his widowed mother "who had already read the darker lines" of the fickle sea despite her hopes in him (28). At the peaceful close, Pratt assuages the mother's grief with the unending rhythm of the ocean waves: ". . . the placid requiem of death. / The stirring of new notes, tranquil and free, / Pulsing their way into a deathless life" (1:37). But how is one to read these last few lines except with a pitying and unbelieving overview? The endless pulsation of the waves implies a human peace achieved only in oblivion or unconsciousness. Surely Anna Lee's final rest underscores her earlier sense of injustice, the inconsolable grief of this daughter-wife-mother wandering toward

> two beetling crags [that]
> Rose from their slippery base, and darkly frowned
> Upon the advancing waves. There in the cleft,
> With arms outstretched, she would implore the sea
> Give up its dead, while the resurgent tides,
> Upbraided would creep guiltily away.
>
> (1:36)

Indeed quite apart from Pratt's unusual projection of guilt upon nature—an ironic projection that surely points beyond to nature's indifference—Pratt uses the woman's grief to magnify the colossal and uncontrollable powers of nature.

"Sea Cathedral" also works against the capricious remoteness of nature. Again Pratt pictures a miraculous answering of our deepest wishes—the "epic" and "cathedral" iceberg, "vast and immaculate beyond all reach of human majesty," encircled by a sunlit halo "in festoons / Over spires, with emerald, amethyst, / Sapphire and pearl," accompanied by a music of "foam bells and the purl of linguals." But the lush "litany" turns into gothic melodrama, into the storm-whirled and crashing noise of "floes from far-off spaces where / Death rides the darkened belfries," and it ends in an unseen and unheard oblivion—the iceberg "drawn down by the inveterate sea / Without one chastening fire made to start / From altars built around its polar heart" (1:167). In Pratt's poem "The Mirage," the iceberg is even more transitory. For the moment with its "glowing towers" and "golden base," its "Cathedral spires" and the "calm and holy in its Sabbath mood," Pratt's language echoes Wordsworth's nature worship, but in the next moment the iceberg disappears, only to reveal itself no more than an airy mirage, a momentary refraction of "the darker irony of light" (1:282-83). This deceptive—indeed treacherous—beauty shows itself again in *The Titanic*, where the iceberg "shambles" and "stumbles" and "drifts" in the path of the unwary ship: this iceberg starts from a familiar "facade" suggesting "inward altars and steepled bells," but

> The sun which left its crystal peaks aflame
> In the sub-arctic noons, began to fret
> The arches, flute the spires and deform
> The features, till the batteries of storm,
> Playing above the slow-eroding base,
> Demolished the last temple touch of grace.
> Another month, and nothing but the brute
> And paleolithic outline of a face
> Fronted the transatlantic shipping route.

It is carved finally into "a sloping spur that tapered to a claw," a "[c]orundum form stripped to its Greenland core" (1:305)—an unsheathed weapon upon which unwary humans impale themselves.

Pratt is not only wary of nature's appearances, he repeatedly points to the disparity between the made truths of poetry and the natural truths that we are made to live within. "Ode to December," for example, starts from the overpowering force of a December storm, laments the loss of Spring's flowers, and gradually transforms nature's conflicting powers into human conflict:

> The trees in angry lurch
> That grew beside each other—
> The hemlock and the birch—
> Now strive with one another,
> In strangely human mood
> Born of unnatural feud.
>
> (1:95)

The storm's lightnings transfigure into "Heaven's lightnings flash[ing] from out a darker scroll," and into Death clothed as "some dread angel of Apocalypse" from whom "fall the swift strokes" of sword/lightning. In this mythic development, the tempest becomes a titanic "will whose function lies alone in power to wreck" (1:96). Further, the "alien blast" turns into a bugle summons to

> earth's legions massed
> Mid bayonets gleaming in the rocket's glare;

And streams that to the North Sea once had brought
The dawn's white silver and the sunset's gold
Now pour such tides as Nature never wrought
The ruddier treasures of wealth untold.

(1:97)

By this time, the winter nadir has turned into a bloody human nadir—and the "nameless triad of the years" into the three-year period of 1914-1917 in World War I. With this merging of the natural and the human, one might expect the poem now to return mythically to a pastoral, springtime refuge. Instead Pratt's long lines invoke even harsher winter winds, winds that will more than "stir the old ashes," winds that will "lift us once again to God" and finally

Blow out . . .
The world's unresting miseries, her shadow and her blight
The story of her passions, and her dark, unfathomed sin,
The outward blow that slaughters, and the guilt that slays

within;
And deep from out the storm's last throes, peel forth in life

re-born
The blazon of the future with the heralds of the morn;
The anthem of a world restrung to human love and grace.
The full-toned orchestration of the heart throbs of the race.

(1:98-99)

Here Pratt turns aside conventional longings for mercy, for the return of "thy bounteous plan" or for the "quietening" of his own cries. Instead he calls for a New Act of Creation arising through apocalyptic destruction. But the imagery of an unbounded wind "singing" through the afterswells of an oceanic storm, blowing out sin and fear and hate and guilt, and pealing forth a new unbounded love anthem—this full-blown, melodramatic imagery—surely draws attention to itself, to a wish for an enlarged human world realizable only in the imagination itself. Surely there is no hint of nature answering such an invocation.

In his elegiac dialogue "Fragments from a Story," Pratt debates whether war's destructiveness serves any larger natural purpose. Thaddeus the traveller tells the horrors of war; Julian the old man questions whether the waste of life can ever be restored—even with the example of springtime's regeneration. The poem moves through a series of Whitmanesque tableaus—first, soldiers suddenly blighted and soon to be displayed under the ironic light of a swollen harvest moon:

Some swayed
Not knowing why they did, as if the breath
Of unnamed pestilence had touched their senses
Robbed them of aim and guidance. Thus they drooped
And fell; and others could not die till hours
Wore into days and nights. Restless they moved
And shuddered; clutched convulsively at stones
Or roots, and clenched their teeth upon their hands
Stifling their moans.

(1:

112-13)

Pratt implies the irresistibility of this "pestilence" by his indiscriminate linking of a field mouse and a war ship—the unrelated small and great suddenly and arbitrarily taken down together:

> Earth's myriad forms
> Had felt the plague-spot of his rampant touch,
> From the small field-mouse, caught within the fumes
> Of sulphurous air that crept from knoll to knoll
> Withering the grass blades, to the giant fighter
> Of storm and wave that, ribbed and sheathed with steel
> Felt the swift scorpion in her sides, then rocked
> And plunged with bellowing nostrils till she sank
> In a wild litany of guns, with wind
> And night, and flame.
>
> (1:114)

Both speakers ask whether the victims of such wholesale destruction can rest their hopes in the turn of the seasonal cycles or in the ongoing renewal of "youth perennial." But Julian asks in return, "Who yields to such delusion?" (1:116)—for November's particular leaves and flowers, there is "no resurrection"; and the newly hatched birds have nothing to do with the dead ones of last year. Thus he returns to the harsh truth of the particular:

> . . . weak ones that, impaled
> Upon the thorn, screamed out their notes of pain
> Or dashed, wing-broken, by the wildering blast,
> Fell when their strength had failed them on far plains
> On treeless hills, or dazed in homeward flight.
> Fluttered and sank in furrows of the sea—
> *Their* song has ended; *They* return no more.
>
> (1:116)

Thaddeus too returns to the particular, to glorious exceptions: "life [like a springtime crocus] push[ing] its way through mire of death," to a young girl sacrificing her place in a lifeboat for an older woman, to wartime nurses tending to the "hot flush of wounds / Made by steel of surgeon and of foe" (1:117), to a "lad" eagerly sacrificing himself in a dark storm and falling near his place of starting (1:118). On a larger scale, however, Thaddeus sees the "Causes" of war's massive destruction returning endlessly as a pestilence, "mad blasts that periodic run / Their cycles of decay" (1:119). Thus Julian the old man asks "how [one can] strike this foul, insistent integer / Clean from his life . . . .The taint is in the blood" (1:120).

Nevertheless in Part II, "A Later Spring," Thaddeus celebrates the new regenerative cycle of flowers and birds in the early spring and dawn, "a quality in this air that stirs / The blood as readily as the balsam sap." He asks what "brew, what chemistry: what hand is this / That grips the pestle?" Yet as he approaches the older man drunk with life, he oddly voices this vitalistic renewal in terms applied earlier to the "pestilence" of war:

> We meet under new skies today.
> The times are changed; the earth renews her face;
> There is a fine contagion in the spring
> For heavy hearts.
>
> (1:123)

to which Julian replies in a similar language—"You would infect the blood of an old man" (1: 123)—and he asks whether this renewal arises merely from day's unawareness of the diurnal alternation of light and dark:

> Is this the ultimate conquest of her will
> That day shall not know the supersession by the
> Night, with earth's diurnal axis overruled?
>
> (1:124)

Thaddeus' final appeal to the older man is made through the image of a church organ's uplifting harmonies—the concord depending upon "the craft of him who plays":

> A blade of grass, a daisy or a pine.
> A wave, a waterfall, a heart-string, these
> Tuned to the world's blood-rhythms, now await,
> As chords you touch, as reeds you breathe upon.
> The rising pulses of the morning air.
>
> (1:125)

This harmony, however, starts not only from the player but also from the uplifting notes preceding him in nature. This basis of hope, however, is drawn out with calculated skepticism: while confessing the aridity of his old age, Julian admits that even he feels

> a knocking in this clay
> A restless flame—something that, if it could,
> Would leap these grammared confines of slow speech.
> And give the echo to your dancing words.
>
> (1:125)

This conditional "could/would" response of the old man to Thaddeus' "dancing words" and to the impelling blood pulsations beyond "the grammared confines of slow speech" leaves an uneasy mixture of hope and doubt: the vernal impulse and the human emotion are both vital and fatal. Renewal also implies destruction as the diastole implies the systole—and this ongoing contradiction leaves the poem deliberately unresolved and uncertain.

Whatever Pratt's natural world is, then,—and whatever natural forces pulse through us—nature is an uncontrolled and dangerous titan: thus our survival depends upon our vigilance before this stranger.

Yet in "Ground Swell," Pratt suggests a primal presence in common, the tide and ebb "calling us with a low insistent note" at noon, dusk and midnight, creeping up from the shore, smiting the window-pane, sounding a "dull pang" akin to human grief:

> Then [it] passed away as some dull pang that grew
> Out of the void before Eternity
> Had fashioned out an edge for human grief
> Before the winds of God had learned to strew
> His harvest sweepings on a winter sea
> To feed the primal hungers of a reef.
>
> (1:
> 63)

This endless flow and ebb—this primeval "pang" pre-sounding human grief—seems at once both remote and kindred.

In "Newfoundland," this nearness is closer yet: the rhythm of the surrounding tides and waves drives through our very being. The kelp on the shore—"*red as the heart's blood, / And salt as tears*," especially as it winds itself about the wreckage of spar and rudder—implies a close, if sinister, mingling of water and blood (1:100). Indeed in the interchange of the Newfoundland waters and the long-lived human shore, Pratt supposes more than the "thunder of insentient seas." He suggests a virtual co-presence in the human mind's projecting itself into the flexing violence of the ocean—"the mind that reads assault / In crouch and leap and the quick stealth, / Stiffening the muscles of the waves." At the poem's close, the rubble of the shore records the desolate aftermath of the warring forces—"*Tide and wind and crag / Sea-weed and sea-shell /And broken rudder*"—but finally "the story is told otherwise": the desolation is contained within a vital human framework "*[o]f human veins and pulses / Of eternal pathways of fire*" where (even as the sea washes through our very being) we maintain our human difference in a vigilant hope and fear—"*Of dreams that survive the night / Of doors held ajar in storms*" (1:101).

What could more aptly suggest this difference between conscious humanity and unconscious nature than Pratt's mythic ballad of "Old Harry"? In this tale, the sea has "faceted" a basalt crag into the shape of a human head and thereby "given" it its "devil's name." The crag incarnates and incarcerates a "demon ruler of the foam . . . changed into an imbecile," condemned forever within this cell to "[l]isten to shrieks of dying men / And stare at phantom ribs and then / Listen again and clutch and stare." The "sea-crazed sen tinel," Old Harry, himself "weary" of the waves' unending destruction "stands" then forever vigilant but dumb and mad with salt weed "matted locks" and "foam forever upon his lips" (2:38). The poem not only dramatizes the mind-numbing cycles of sea waves; it virtually enacts a human revenge by turning these mindless forces back upon themselves, making the crag itself endure the unutterable endlessness of natural degradation.

Yet Pratt's attitude toward nature is often difficult to pin down. For example, his presentation of the shark betrays a remote yet uneasy compound of wonder, fear and admiration. George Whalley writes:

> Pratt conveys a sense of single events of extreme intensity that open our gaze, if only for the moment, to our fellowship with an order of life that is inevitably shaped by our past on this planet, by things that we were and that happened to us long before we received the definition that could even remotely be called 'human'. "The Shark," a very early poem, is an imagist poem in motion, the motion being a premonitory gesture unexplained; and it may be that single vision standing simply for what it is, is more potent in implication than the later rhetorical identification of a submarine and a shark—an identity that only works for one side of the conflict. . . . (186-87)

Yet, while the poem is a virtual dumb show without conclusion, the action of the shark's swimming *is* explained so far as the speaker says the "leisurely" shark "seems to know"—if not own—the harbour or human haven. The shark, however, is abstracted into a triangular knife-edge fin "stirring not a bubble"; beyond the shark's generalized U-turn, the speaker notes only one particular act (in the flash of its white teeth and throat) as it "snaps at a flat fish." Everything else about this fish—its eyes "metallic grey /Hard and narrow and slit," its body "tubular, tapered, smoke blue"—implies the functional design of a machine, not a particular living creature. Thus, the recapitulated details of the close

vary only so far as they imply even greater mechanical efficiency: the knife-edge fin is now (positively) "shearing" (instead of negatively "stirring not a bubble"); the swimming is now not only "leisurely" but "lithely." Pratt's final two lines themselves mimic the movement of this strangely mechanical yet supple fish—for the shortest of moments, Pratt's analogies take hold of the predatory nature of the shark as vulture and wolf, but then Pratt releases the shark: the poet "lithely' denies his analogies and flicks sharply in a new direction, giving a new twist to the submerged and hackneyed metaphor of 'cold blooded murderer':

> Part vulture, part wolf,
> Part neither—for his blood was cold.
>
> (1:67)

The shark is a sinister visitor sharing a common cold origin with us—apparently familiar with us but with whom we are allowed no familiarity. Like a god-fearing Job, Pratt not only refuses to land his formidable leviathan, he finally refuses even to barb his poet's hook.

In "The Submarine," Pratt's shark displaces the German "commander" from the centre of the poem. The man ends as a mere mechanical sensor calculating distance and direction, and unleashing torpedoes toward an Allied troop and supply ship. In Pratt's short lines, perception, reaction and calculation become virtually one—

> An hour of light on the western sky
> And thirty seconds for descent;
> The quarry was ten miles off. Stand by!
>
> (2:31)

Human consciousness reverts to a rhapsodic blood lust for "fat mammalian" prey:

> Blood of tiger, blood of shark
> What a prey to stalk and strike
> From an ambush in the dark
> Thicket of the sea.
>
> (2:33)

The human eye becomes a glass lens remotely transfiguring the torpedoes' fatal trajectory into no more than "tenuous feather," a bird's wing "skimming the swell" (34). The 'release' of the torpedoes transfigures into the 'delivery' of shark offspring immediately ready to kill. The submarine mother herself originates neither in nature's random selection:

> No product she of Nature's dower
> No casual selection wrought her
> Or gave her such mechanic power
> To breathe above or under water.
>
> (2:32)

Nor in any deliberate human selection—for with the "commander" or "master" having himself devolved into mere hands or eyes, the submarine takes over the feeling presence:

> Now with her hyper-sensitive feel
> Of her master's hands on the controls—
> A pull of switch, a turn of wheel,

The submarine, like the deep sea shark
Went under cover, away from the light
And limn of the sunset, from the sight
Of the stars, to a native lair as dark
As a Kraken's grave.

(2:35)

With feeling and will having devolved from the "master's hand" to the machine, the submarine makes its own descent into darkness; through its oscilloscope, it registers and immediately interprets the approaching rhythm—"too rapid, too hectic for freighter or liner! . . . She took her course . . . She drove her nose down . . . away from the scent and lust / Of a killer whose might was as great as her own" (2:35). Here the ideological war between democracy and fascism is no more than the proving ground for the evolution of autonomic killing machines. While the poet himself seems strangely absent from the poem, his silent displacement of the commander by the machine can be seen (again in Whalley's words) as "a premonitory gesture unexplained": Pratt's submarine surely points the way to the late-twentieth century, a world of sensors, 'guided' missiles, bureaucratic and computer programmes, integrated systems all too often without a helmsman. As Whalley suggests, unleashed, unguided, and unreflecting powers become our nightmare. In a world where submarine encounters destroyer and where the human presence is an absence, Pratt dramatizes the horror of mindless, 'objective' destruction.

In "The Prize Cat" Pratt brings this nightmare home through the hackneyed language of advertising—the cat is "[p]ure blood, domestic, guaranteed." Sharply chosen words puncture the speaker's blandly stupid and self-congratulatory musing upon technological control, upon the cat fancier's shaping of his breed— "How human hands had disciplined /Those prowling optic parallels" (1:301). The word "prowling" rubs against the machine language of physics—restless eyes *not* tamed to "optic parallels." Moreover Pratt implies that the tabby's feral instincts are more fixed than its standardized points of breed. Thus the sudden leap of the tabby for the sparrow brings to mind a fixed, mechanical, reflex "spring"—and the scream of an Abyssinian child heard in the "whitethroat's scream" appropriately recalls not only a large cat taking down its prey but also Abyssinia taken down by the imperial predator, Italy. The sudden assault implies colossal powers uncontrolled and irresistible—not just out there in the external world but here, close by, inside the domestic cat and within our own 'civilized' self. Indeed the ellipsis, the undeclared logic resting between two blandly simple statements, silently presents an undeniable natural reflex:

A bird had rustled in the grass,
The tab had caught it on the wing. . . .

Such ironic understatement forces one to question terms like "humanity" or "human progress"—and to reconsider bland formulations about Pratt's own humanity—his "courage, compassion and courtesy."

III

Pratt's last major poem, *Towards The Last Spike*, would seem to be an epic celebration of Canada's social mythology, a nation's successful joining of itself from 'sea to sea' by rail—by human imagination, ingenuity, will and courage. The metaphor of marriage between our Lady of British Columbia and Sir John A. Macdonald, the closing of the enormous distances of Canada, the working against the North-South drift of the stars and the natural North/South trade—all this would seem to imply an imposition of human will over and upon an alien yet

ultimately pliable and domesticable nature. It would also seem to contradict my earlier contention that as Pratt insists upon the vulnerability of mankind, he thereby magnifies the powers of nature, even as he shows feral powers rising through the machines which supposedly liberate mankind from nature's limits.

Yet *Towards the Last Spike*, in its "romance and realism," remains true to Pratt's overall meaning. The union of Canada, the triumph of civilization, is genuine, but in Pratt's mock epic and ironic overview, temporary, costly and fragile. In his opening, Pratt once again takes on the familiar, inflated, self-congratulating language of progress, but here mankind's exceeding of old limits and records takes place only within limits or degrees—for Pratt's natural world is elusive, shifting and dynamic but ultimately obdurate and limiting. The 'fittest' humans who attempt to take hold of this natural world are themselves shifty in their energetic adaptation of alternative means to their single-minded ends, but Pratt finally implies a natural world forever beyond the grasp of our controlling human consciousness. The difference between Pratt's view and that of his nineteenth-century American predecessors, Walt Whitman and William James, then, is that Pratt does not imagine a world encircled or contained by human purpose, or a malleable world (with our aid) capable of being redeemed or saved. Instead Pratt's Canadian hinterland is so vast and remote, it shows the hollowness of the myth of progress. Like Leacock's final chapter, "L'Envoi" in *Sunshine Sketches*, where the return is finally no more than a wish out of the Mausoleum Club, Pratt's railway ending is derailed by humour. In Pratt's tale, the point of arrival is no more than an awkward pause at a new point of beginning.

Significantly, then, in his opening peroration, Pratt writes of "the same world then as now"—the same in the 1950s as in the 1880s—"except for little differences of speed and power," new lenses for correcting and extending vision, new medicines for anaesthetizing or sensitizing nerves, new mathematics and physics for re-mapping the enlarged heavens, new words or images or analogies or prayers like, "Give us our daily bread, give us our pay" (2:201). But he implies that these needs and ends—if not the means—remain the same, as do our finite seeing and reaching remain the same: "The same world then as now thirsting for power / To crack those records open, extra pounds / Upon the inches, extra miles per hour" (2:202). Final goals and truths then, take on an unreal, nominalist quality, especially as they are relayed through the hyperbolic and transitory catchwords of the newspapers. Pratt mimics the hot air and turbulence of the headlines:

> Men spoke of acres then and miles and masses,
> Velocity and steam, cables that moored
> Not ships but continents, world granaries,
> The east-west cousinship, a nation's rise,
> Hail of identity, a world expanding,
> If not the universe: the feel of it
> Was in the air—'Union required the Line.'

But while the age-old battle between believers and doubters remains the same, while mortality (the same red blood "keeping its ancient colour" but threatening always to rupture its banks) remains unavoidable, Pratt maintains a skeptical distance from his human drama: he implies that the heated debate of the moment is no more than a conflict of wills—the latest slogans, no more than convenient fictions or clichés:

> Even St. Paul was being invoked to wring
> The neck of Thomas in this war of faith
> With unbelief. Was ever an adventure
> Without its cost? Analogies were found

On every page of history or science.
A nation, like the world, could not stand still.
What was the use of records but to break them?
(2:202)

And yet while Pratt's historicism implies the incompleteness of any achievement, he obviously sides with the warm-blooded 'believers' and 'doers.'

Certainly in *Towards the Last Spike,* Pratt's sympathizes with his corporate and political adventurers—even as they smack of shysterism. Sir John A. Macdonald, the wordsmith politician, searches his mind for the opportune word or phrase that will make his people realize his East/West vision: words become mere rhetorical cogs or wheels in his engineering of the union:

He had pledged
His word the Line should run from sea to sea.
"From sea to sea", a hallowed phrase. Music
Was in that text if the right key were struck.
And he must strike first, for, as he fingered
The clauses of the pledge, rough notes were rasping—
"No road, no Union" and the converse true.
(2:207)

In this game or battle of wills, Truth is at best convenient—at worst, an inconvenient obstacle. Indeed as the insomniac and crafty Macdonald searches the cluttered night skies for confirming signs of his way, he finds only inconvenient 'truths'—the "north-south drift" of the stars, constellations bumping into each other, and blizzards of stars clouding the truth beyond. Moreover history and memory become no more than a storehouse of convenient figures of speech: the Red River settlement by the Scots crofters becomes a mere peg on which to hang a patriotic appeal:

He could make use of that—just what he needed,
A western version of the Arctic daring,
Romance and realism, double dose.
. . . .
They wanted now the Road—these pioneers
Who lived by spades instead of beaver traps.
Most excellent word that, pioneers! Sir John
Snuggled himself into his sheets, rolling
The word around his tongue, a theme for a song,
Or for a peroration to a speech.
(2:206-07)

Pratt's modulation of his narrative voice into this self-dramatizing soliloquy reminds one of Shakespeare's racy poet/villains rehearsing their schemes, savouring with their playwright the deviousness of their strategies. But Pratt takes on an even more playful turn: Van Home, the Bunyanesque man of action, appears in a busy linguistic medium that plays ironically against itself, against the bombastic stuff of heroic frontier legend; and yet the kinetic hyperbole works both ways—simultaneously deflating and inflating Van Home into an insatiable hero always reaching for more:

. . . he
Could straighten crooked roads by pulling at them,
Sheer down a hill and drain a bog or fill
A valley overnight. Fast as a bobcat,

He'd climb and run across the shakiest trestle
Or, with a locomotive short of coal,
He would supply the head of steam himself.
He breakfasted on bridges, lunched on ties;
Drinking from gallon pails, he dined on moose.

(2:231)

Indeed with a similar extravagant mock-seriousness, Pratt attributes the vigour of the Scotsmen (who realized Macdonald's and Van Home's dream) to the nutritive chemistry of oatmeal—this lowly food transubstantiating small men into bristling giants of work:

the liver
Took on its natural job of carpenter:
Foreheads grew into cliffs, jaws into juts.
The meal, so changed, engaged the follicles:
Eyebrows came out as gorse, the beard as thistles,
And the chest-hair the fell of Grampian rams.
Nonagenarians worked and thrived upon it.

(2:203)

But standing against the success of this comically inflated and bristling spirit is the costive, phlegmatic spirit of Blake and the obdurate natural world itself, the Laurentian Shield, in Pratt's metaphor of the sleepy dragon. Even the leader of the opposition, Blake, however, is capable—to the chagrin of Macdonald—of chancing upon a galvanic metaphor: thus Macdonald prays that Blake not stray from his dour ways. As Blake argues that "it can't be done":

[Macdonald] did not mind the close
Mosaic of the words—too intricate,
Too massive in design. Men might admire
The speech and talk about it, then forget it.
But few possessed the patience or the mind
To tread the mazes of the labyrinth.
Once in a while, however, would Blake's logic
Stumble upon stray figures that would leap
Over the walls of other folds and catch
The herdsmen in their growing somnolence.
The waking sound was not—'It can't be done';
That was dogma, anyone might say it.
It was the following burning corollary:
'To build a road over that sea of mountains.'
That carried more than argument. It was
A flash of fire which might with proper kindling
Consume its way into the public mind.

(2:217)

Moreover Blake's quirky wit parallels the unplumbed and unpredictable mega-quirks—the glacial and volcanic twitches—of the torpid, almost timeless bulk of the Laurentian Shield, the female dragon lying in the way of the romantic and epic hero. In one of his readings, Pratt attributed the dragon's lethargy or unresponsiveness to its female temperament and (cunningly?) assigned its femaleness to his wife's reading of his dragon:

'I notice,' my wife said, 'that the main qualities of your lizard are extreme age, stubbornness, a dislike of movement or activity, a suspicion of men, and a desire to be left alone. It is her desire to be very drowsy, but she is not altogether insensible to dynamite. When she

is aroused, she can exhibit the power and violence of an earthquake.'

(As quoted in Gingell 148)

Indeed this passive ' bulk . . . neither yielding nor resisting . . . / Top heavy with accumulated power / And overgrown survival without function," sounds increasingly like a member of an outmoded and privileged class, one who is put off by noisy and busy upstarts. She resents "their foreign build, their gait of movement, / They did not crawl—nor were they born with wings. They stood upright and walked, shouted and sang" (2:229). She also resents these men "out for business" blasting and exposing her mineral innards: "The caches of her broods / Broke— nickel, copper, silver and fool's gold / Burst from their immemorial dormitories / To sprawl indecent in the light of day" (2:239). But she answers this indignity swiftly by means of her muskeg, whose surface "betray[s] visual solidarity" as deceptive as the "carnivorous bladder wort" and "pitcher plant." She takes down three engines and seven tracks without a trace—a mere hint of what she can do in periods of "ice" or fiery "convulsion" (2:239). Thus she turns again to her sleepy folds knowing "someday perhaps" she would "claim their bones as her possessive right / And wrap them cold in her pre-Cambrian folds" (2:239-40).

That this kind of gigantic engulfment *is* potential is suggested through a tiny aberration in Pratt's triumphant but off-key denouement. Instead of choosing silver or gold for the ceremonial last spike, Van Home insists upon "Iron." In Pratt's replication of the famous snapshot, the men stand like unreal "properties upon a stage" rather than as excited celebrants; the surrounding air is "taut / With silences as rigid as spruces" (2:248). All seems understated but charged and ready. But the laconic comment of the narrator— "The job was done"—is as understated as the iron spike and as deliberately off the mark as Donald Smith's mis-gauging and mis-hitting the iron spike:

> Now here he was caught by the camera
> Back bent, head bowed, and staring at a sledge,
> Outwitted by an idiotic nail.
> Though from the crowd no laughter, yet the spike
> With its slewed neck was grinning up at Smith.
>
> (2:248)

For all his lifetime of clever timing, the canny Scottish financier is made a fool. Thus the lesson: several cautious taps with the hammer and then one last battle-axe blow, an enraged "ram[ming] it to its home," then the raucous cheers and once again Van Home's understated "'Well done'—tied in a knot of monosyllables." But the last word is given over to the silent lizard who hears the stroke: "The breed had triumphed after all" (2:250). But what kind of triumph is it, after all? We were warned earlier of the lizard's glacial and volcanic caprices. Now in Pratt's long range present, this metaphor of nature's unconscious obduracy hunkers down once again in sleep:

> To drown
> The traffic chorus, she must blend the sound
> With those inaugural, narcotic notes
> Of storm and thunder which would send her back
> Deeper than ever in Laurentian sleep.
>
> (2:250)

Against this vast backdrop, Pratt's tiny but sturdy human actors make triumphant noises that sound off-key. Canada's supposed apostle of the corporations and

technology shows a surprisingly wry and remote perspective upon both mankind and nature.

Works Cited

Bimey, Earle. "E.J. Pratt and his Critics." *Masks of Poetry* Ed. A.J.M. Smith.Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968.

Davey, Frank. "Apostle of Corporate Man." *Canadian Literature* 43 (1970): 54-65.

_____. "E.J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician." *Canadian Literature* 61 (1974): 65-78.

Djwa, Sandra. *E.J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision.* Toronto: Copp Clark, 1974.

Dudek, Louis. "Poet of the Machine Age." *E.J. Pratt.* Ed. David C. Pitt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1969.

Frye, Northrop. "Silence in the Sea." *E.J. Pratt.* Ed. David C. Pitt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1969.

Gingell, Susan, ed. *E.J. Pratt on His Life and Poetry.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1983.

Herf, Jeffrey. *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. New York: Cambridge University, 1986.

Jones, D.G. *Butterfly on Rock.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970.

Pacey, Desmond. *Ten Canadian Poets.* 1958. Toronto: Ryerson, 1969.

Pratt, E.J. *E.J.Pratt: Complete Poems.* Vols. I and II. Ed. Sandra Djwa and R.G. Moyles. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989.

Sharman, Vincent. "Illusion and Atonement: Pratt and Christianity." *E.J. Pratt.* Ed. David G. Pitt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1969.

Smith, A.J.M. "A Garland for E.J. Pratt." *On Poetry and Poets* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977.

Sutherland, John. "E.J. Pratt: Application for a Grant." *John Sutherland: Essays, Controversies and Poems.* Ed. Miriam Waddington. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972.

Wells, Henry W. and Carl F. Klinck. *Edwin I. Pratt: the Man and His Poetry.* Toronto: Ryerson, 1947.

Whalley, George. "Birthright to the Sea: Some Poems of E.J. Pratt." *Studies in Literature and the Humanities.* Eds. Brian Crick and John Ferns. London: Macmillan, 1985.