

E. J. PRATT AND WILLIAM BLAKE: AN ANALYSIS

Judging by E. J. Pratt's lone reference to William Blake—the facetious epigram about the uger and the lamb in *The Witches' Brew*—the dean of Canadian poets can have little conscious sympathy with the great English mystic of 150 years ago. Yet of all writers before Pratt, none—in the deeper and more profound sense—bore him closer resemblance. Pratt is a fine poet, and, in the field of the arts, our most truly native product. His birth and early manhood in Newfoundland shows through almost every line he has written since. He is not affectedly “Canadian,” but neither is he a member of any foreign “school.” The transmuted strains of his inspiration have not been traced back to their foreign sources, and I am not trying to establish Blake as a major “influence” on Pratt. Indeed, I strongly suspect that their similarities are more fortuitous than causal.

Though Blake is often difficult to read, and Pratt always easy, the style of the two poets has, none the less, much in common: a style based upon architectural language, the sheer might and glory of sentences piled up in a pyramid of sound and fury, raising worlds on fire by the power of the word, and destroying them by a turn of phrase. Both Blake and Pratt become colossi of the imagination, each envisioning himself as an antediluvian giant, or a titan moving among the birth-springs of creation. Almost alone among poets, they see things readily in cosmic proportions, deal easily with vast quantities of space or time. Milton, turning the story of the cosmos and the fall of man into an epic, reduced it to the proportions of a feudal war. Blake, doing the same with the French and American revolutions, raised them to the proportions of a cosmic myth. And Pratt, in *The Great Fraud*, succeeds in giving wings even to the pedestrian fancies of biology, until they rise to sit upon Mount Olympus.

This poem is a strange blend of science, humour, allegory, and mythology, always with evocations of racial memories playing like fire-devils above the sulphurous plains of this fantastic Armageddon, until at last the simian mother of

mankind emerges, a lone survivor from the holocaust, to brood over the end and the beginning. This is such stuff as great myths are made of, and no poet in North America—not even Hart Crane in "The Bridge"—has succeeded in creating a myth so convincingly. Pratt here conducts a romantic excursion into eschatology, and it is no accident that the poem was written at a time when, to quote Pratt, "the fear of racial doom was thrown . . . heavily upon the soul." *The Great Feud* was published in 1926, when the dreams of peace and perpetual progress had already faded, and when poets, whose intuitions always outstrip to their goal the plodding logic of science and history, could foresee the twentieth century as the century of the great human crisis, when the civilization which we know might fall of its own weight, like any mushroom-shaped structure, and when the whole human community faced an End and a Beginning. Pratt's appreciation of the superficiality of civilization, of progress, and of the accretion of gadgets which we have mistakes for human evolution, is expressed in his lyric "From Stone To Steel".

The Great Feud is saved from mere pessimism, and Pratt's implicit philosophy from mere eschatologistic romance, by the survival of the female anthropoid ape, confused, not understanding, but emerging from Armageddon with her brood to take over a ruined world and make a Beginning out of the End. The theme is that progress is not a straight-line march out of the darkness of a few years past into the noonday of a few years hence, but a movement of almost glacial slowness through eras of geologic time, but none the less real; that in our recurrent Armageddons the elements of this great movement survive, inching along the grand cycles of civilization and barbarism. In its implications *The Great Feud* is the most important of Pratt's poems—perhaps not quite so felicitous at a casual reading as *The Cachalot*, but with far deeper meaning. The poem has its nearest philosophical parallel in Blake's epic, *The Four Zoas*. Blake's philosophy is stated more directly, and this makes the poem more difficult to read and harder to grasp. Moreover, Pratt's symbols, being well-known figures out of the Pliocene or of the earth's history, convey ready meanings to the reader's mind and give the poem a simplicity and flow, even for those who do not bother with its philosophical content at all, whereas Blake's symbols, being creations of his own unaided imagination, require a great deal of study before they convey much meaning, even to the serious student. It is not possible for me, in this brief study, to attempt an exposition of Blake's symbolism, for our main concern now being Pratt, we must leave Blake as a titanic shadow in the background, pointing out certain parallels, describing the broad outlines of their sympathy, but leaving many details for those sufficiently interested to investigate.

It is not in the anthologized *Songs of Innocence* that we find William Blake in local descent from the Prophet Isaiah and the writer of the Book of Job. Nor is it in such school-book poems as "The 6000" and "Erosion" that Pratt reveals himself as a prophet in a wilderness of steel girders—a champion of the creative imagination in "a century gone dead from the the heart out." Both Blake and Pratt refused to conform to the current conceits of their time: Blake refused to shut up his utterances in the neat little stylized pockets of the eighteenth century, and Pratt refused to retreat into the arty ectosphere which is so often the cloak of poetry in the twentieth. In both poets we must go to the narratives—really short epics, with all the properties of epics except length and dullness—if we wish to see the creative imagination at work.

The philosophy (or theology) of the two poets is similar. The core of Blake's plainly-stated philosophy is that the creative imagination is the origin of all things, the only "real" things being things of the imagination, that the realm of the imagination is peopled with immortals, and that there God Himself has his abode. He even goes to the extreme, stating that it is there "we shall live in our real, or imaginary bodies" when the illusion of mortality disappears. This should be compared with Pratt's defiant poem "The Truant", in which he castigates orthodox conceptions, and makes man the measure of all things.

Without wishing to stretch the superficial aspects of the Blake-Pratt parallelism beyond natural limits, I must also remark that each poet over-extended himself and produced as his most ambitious work what could be charitably described as a magnificent failure. Blake's *Jerusalem* failed mainly because his friends' esteem for his earlier works led him on to the construction of a truly monumental epic—with the result that he fell into the trap of didactics and exposition, his symbols decaying into allegory. Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren* failed because the theme, though heroic enough, is not amenable to the medium. One suspects that Pratt fell into the same error as his great predecessor. Certainly the temptation was there: a great Canadian story just waiting to be done into verse, and an awakening Canadian nationalism ready to acclaim its author. But just as *Jerusalem* is not typically Blake, so *Brébeuf* is not typically Pratt, except for such stanzas as the following:

Where in the winter the white pines could brush
The Pleiades, and at the equinoxes
Under the gold and green of the auroras
Wild geese drove wedges through the zodiac.

Even at its stirring climax, *Brébeuf* is an unnatural child. Consider these lines:

Nor in the symbol of Richelieu's robes or the seals
 Of Mazarin's charters, nor in the stir of the lilies
 Upon the Imperial folds; nor yet in the words
 Loyola wrote on a table of lava-stone
 In the cave of Manresa—not in these the source—
 But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing
 Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
 By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.

No one will deny that this is poetry. Though not quite at the level of the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, it would have done credit to Milton. But it is not Pratt, and it is important for a poet to be himself, rather than a second-rate Milton.

Pratt is most creatively himself when indulging in biological descriptions based on the mechanical metaphor, as in *The Cachalot*. Sometimes he invents the figure and gives us mechanical descriptions based on the biological metaphor, as in *The Submarine*. *The Cachalot* is Pratt at his technical peak, and except for a few pardonable lapses such as the atrocious opening lines of Part III, the poem throughout shows a master of words at work. Pratt's description of the internal mechanism of the whale is one of the miracles of rhymed verse. It has a deceptive ease and flow of phrase, as though the poem were not a creation of conscious art, but a growth of nature, like the whale himself. Any modern poet who thinks it is difficult to write good free verse (as indeed it is) should try this sort of thing, and he will find, as Ruskin said when comparing Correggio's children with conventional room decorations: "More desirable . . . if you can do them—but they are not quite so easily done."

Psychologically, *The Cachalot* is much simpler and more primitive than *The Great Feud*. Like a lot of Blake's work, it is involved in the old myth of the conflict of Good and Evil. The cachalot, personifying Good, is the legendary hero who must engage in mortal combat with Evil, personified by the giant squid, and must, of course, be the victor. This is the myth which appears on a lower level in Superman, Hopalong Cassidy, and the speeches of Winston Churchill. In *The Cachalot* Pratt goes a step farther—a step which the TV writers and the politicians have not learned to take. He introduces the sequel of the myth—the element of Fate, which dominates Greek tragedy and the rituals of antiquity. The whalers are fate overtaking the hero—the challenge which it is impossible for him to meet, and which relieves him of responsibility for his ultimate defeat. He dies, of course, a hero's death, which is not death in the ordinary sense but a sort of inverted victory—a "mi-

or imaginary" victory, as Blake would have described it. Perhaps the simple philosophy of *The Cachalot* is more suited to the pre-natal stage of thought in our era than are the rational optimism and the subtle overtones of *The Great Feud* and *The Four Zoas*. We are not yet ready for a world picture in which good and evil are merely useful and conventional symbols of a greater, hidden process that works behind and through them.

Pratt is almost unique in having no earlier and later periods. He was a fully finished craftsman from the time of the publication of his first book of poetry—*Newfoundland Poems*—and except for increased emphasis on the narrative form cannot be said to show any great development. But a sort of formal development followed September 1939—a branching out into the roominess of blank and free verse, with a shift of emphasis to deeper human problems. Much the same is true of Blake, though his narratives do show some degree of development over the earlier lyrics—a greater degree of philosophical or theological maturity.

Such lyrics as "The Radio In The Ivory Tower," "Come Away Death," "The Baritone," and "The Stoics" illustrate Pratt's shift of emphasis. From such poems it would be easy to prove him a pacifist, and indeed a slightly earlier poem, *The Fable Of The Goats*, may be regarded as a pacifist essay. This is a fable in the true sense—as extravaganza with a didactic punch—not allegory or myth. The poem is generally considered the least satisfying of Pratt's pre-war narratives, perhaps because it represents a wistful striving after the impossible. It is full of such epigrammatic observations on the goatishness of international relations as this:

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

and it also has such passages as the following, illustrating the futility of conflict:

Every time when honour, wronged,
 Secured revenge upon the peaks,
 Inevitably the spoils belonged
 To the swiftest wings and sharpest beaks—
 The harpies and the cormorants
 Who, compensating for the theft
 Of blood and flesh and fat, had left
 The glory to the ruminants.

The real moral of the fable is that we have wars because we want them, and that war will die out just as soon as the desire for it dies out of the heart. No wonder *The Fable Of The Goats* is not as popular as *The Cachalot*! We are a long way from being ready to take the flesh and give away the glory.

Pratt has reached that stage, as Blake reached it 150 years earlier, but Blake made the mistake of supposing human nature to be far more advanced than it actually is (a common mistake of idealists) and confused war with imperialism. His view was that when empire was no more "then the lion and the wolf should cease"—a view too naive for our day, though it is still held by some doctrinaire socialists. Pratt, like Blake, has a very deep hatred of violence, especially the violence of armed conflict, and even in wartime he escaped the prevailing passions. He wrote sadly of the panorama of human folly. He did not, as might have been expected, glorify the gallant little ships which hounded the *Graf Spee* to her death, or the incredible heroism of the battle of the *Jarvis Bay*. Instead he wrote "Autopsy On A Sadist," and "The Stoics." In his long lyric, *They Are Returning*, he showed his only streak of bitterness, and his disgust at what he called "the mass-production of crosses." His heroic war poem is an epic of escape. In *Dunkirk* not a shot is fired against the enemy, but one of Pratt's favourite themes—the heroism of the ordinary man: rich man, poor man, beggar man or thief—is forcefully stated. Never in all literature is this theme more vigorously expounded than in *The Titanic*, and never more ironically and pathetically than in "The Convict Holocaust." Pratt is an intense humanist, believing supremely in man, irrespective of fashion or fortune. The heroism of the Jesuits in *Brébeuf* is the same as the heroism of the dead criminals in the prison lyric. Many of those criminals

"Gave proof of valour, just before they died,
Which Caesar's legions might have coveted."

This theme runs through most of the short epics, and is expressed with great passion in "The Truant," where man talks back to God in these lines:

You oldest of the hierarchs
Composed of electronic sparks,
We grant you speed
We grant you power, and fire
That ends in ash, but 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 . . .
. . . We who have met
With stubborn calm the dawn's hot fusillades;
We who have seen the forehead sweat
Under the tug of pulleys at the joints.
Under the liquidating tally

Of cat-and-truncheon hastinades;
 Who have taught our souls to rally
 To mountain horns, and the sea's rockets
 When the needle ran demented through the points . . .

These "mountain horns" are identical with Brébeuf's "invisible trumpets." It does not matter that they do not blow around the slabs of board on the Jewish hill. They blew ten years earlier in the simple and perfect lyric, "Old Age," wherein Pratt describes an old man, "so poor again, with all that plunder taken," reduced "to the round of a wheel chair and four dull walls." But he lifts the imagination in the heroic last stanza:

I knew by some high trick of sight and hearing
 Your heart was lured beyond the window sills,
 Adventuring where the valley mists were clearing,
 And silver horns were blowing on the hills.

Those silver horns are the bugles of human valour, blowing alike across the fleet of cockshells at Dunkirk and through the prison block at Columbus. They play a lullaby for man himself, the real colossus, prototype of all the gods and heroes of art and legend and mythology.

So far we have been discussing Pratt's philosophy and method. I now propose to discuss briefly his myth and his technique. By "myth" I mean the system of faith on which an author's work is built, the assumptions which integrate his thought and activate his concepts. It is just here that the very core of the Blake-Pratt sympathy lies, for the myth from which Pratt's poetry arises is very similar to Blake's, with this difference: that Pratt escapes Blake's so-called Fourfold Vision, and with it the everlasting fight against dualism which Blake was forced to maintain. Pratt needed no "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," since his heaven and hell were never divided. The myth of both poets is based on the divinity of man (not on the so-called "sanctity of the person," which is a popular platitude of quite a different colour). Blake believes man to be both the source and the product of divinity, the world in which all immortals dwell, and also their instrument. Pratt believes, quite simply, that not only all gods, but all godliness, dwell in the human breast. All things begin and end in man.

Perhaps the essence of Pratt's greatness lies not so much in the perfection of his technique as in his attainment of a coherent mythology—an attainment rare among poets of this century, in which so many mythological systems struggle together, and in which the mythological dominant—mechanism—is hostile to poetry. Not only that (for the author of "Superman" has a coherent mythology too), but

Pratt's mythology is significant for his time. We have laboured so long under the soul-chilling influence of astrophysics, relegating man to the position of the little flea on the back of the lesser flea, that the reaffirmation of our cosmic importance becomes necessary, if we are not to lie down and die of sheer futility. Pratt, like Blake before him, achieves a myth in which man is absolutely central, but which at the same time does not try to deny the validity of science. In this direction Pratt is even more successful than Blake, absorbing science and mechanism into the very fabric of his poetry, making them bear the fruits of the spirit. But he also sees science in the human context, not as man's god but as history. Man, he says,

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

The phrase "man's place in the cosmos," with which lesser writers tried to salvage human dignity, loses its meaning in Pratt's great conception. Besides the greatness of the human spirit, the cosmos itself he declares is but

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

It was many, many years since any poet had been able to make such a courageous assertion of human worth as Pratt made in "The Truant." And many a waste laid lay in between.

Pratt's narrative is quite lacking in characterization. With the exception of the Brébeuf epic, not a single clear character emerges in any of his poems, and even in *Brébeuf* his characters are shadowy, spiritual things, on the borderline between flesh and essence. In good narrative poetry this is unusual. Milton's Satan is as bold a character as ever walked through a novel. Byron's Don Juan, and many of the lesser characters in his brilliant satires, are drawn as cleverly as anything in prose. In Earle Birney's *David*, an unusual type of narrative in which we might excuse lack of characterization, two characters emerge. Even such essentially symbolic and allegorical poets as Chaucer and Spenser richly depict real men and women. One might have expected as much of Pratt or Blake, but neither poet produces a character. I suspect that neither was able to produce one, and for the same reason. They both dealt in abstractions, as expressed in the one case through allegory, and in the other case through the dramatic situation. In Blake's *Book of Urizen* it is not Urizen himself, nor Los, nor Fuzon, that Blake wishes to describe: rather it is the symbolic acts—the binding of Urizen, the birth of Orc, Fuzon leading Urizen's son out of Egypt. In Pratt's sea epic *The Titanic*, despite nearly a score of people mentioned by name, the nearest thing to a character is the iceberg, which is grey, moss-

lethic, and impersonally malevolent, like Fate. It is again the symbolic acts: the orchestra playing fox trots as the ship goes down, Astor tapping a cigarette on a silver case—which give purpose and meaning to the poem. I do not sit in judgment on this shortcoming in Pratt and Blake. Just as a treatise on physics cannot well be written in verse, just so a panegyric on heroism cannot have a Mr. Micawber. And it would have been a defect had Blake invested his Eternal Prophet with mannerisms or red hair. Blake's mythology is richer and more complex than Pratt's, his symbols more "true," his system more fully integrated. It is in the realms of technique that he fails. His long poems invariably dissolve into debate, his giants howling and shrieking in a monotonous uproar, until the situation is resolved by a cosmic convulsion. With this lifeless technique imposed upon characters that live only for students of symbolic psychology the general reader is often bored. But only a moron can be bored with Pratt, for his technique is brilliant. Whereas Blake began with orderly metre and precise image, straying as his system developed into long, loose metres choked with rhetoric, Pratt's imagery became more crystalline as he went along, his verses more polished and self-confident. His style might be described as tight—marching rather than ambling. And though an amble through Albion's countryside can be pleasant, vast armies of mythological giants, all ambling, become a mob. The marching of Pratt's mechanical monsters, though perhaps less conducive to philosophy, is a lot easier to watch. Structurally, Blake allowed his verse unrestrained efflorescence, whereas Pratt pruned his to the stock. Blake would have taken a thousand lines to say the following, which come from Pratt's *Cabalot*:

And from the start, by fast degrees
 He won in all hostilities,
 Sighted a hammerhead and followed him,
 Ripped him from jaw to ventral, swallowed him;
 Pursued a shovelnose and mangled him,
 Twisted a broadbill's neck and strangled him.

The fast pace excuses the omissions.

Pratt's lyrics have been overshadowed by the luminosity of his epics, and trying to approach the lyrics with a fresh outlook is like trying to assess the literary qualities of the Bible as though one had never been to church. The lyrics are usually identical in mood and technique with the epics, like pieces of epics which never got written—and, in the formal sense, they possess the same virtues. For example, "The Prize Cat" or "Autopsy on a Sadist," could have been lifted straight out of *The Cabalot* or *The Submarine*. The lyrics possess the same magic turn of phrase as

do the epics. No poet, with the possible exception of A. E. Housman, ever possessed Pratt's ability to perform stunts with words. And Housman could not sustain his conjuring for page after page, as Pratt can. Examples of what I mean, among many others, are the versified poker game in *The Titanic* and the list of ingredients in *The Witches' Brew*.

In few lyrics does Pratt discard the narrative manner, and in the most ambitious of all, "The Iron Door," even the narrative *form* is maintained. I know of no other elegiac ode written in narrative. It is one of the best, and is evidently based on a real mystical experience. Though the poem calls this experience a dream, it contains all the elements of the classic form of "enlightenment" or "conversion" as described by William James. First comes the admission of perplexity before the enigma of man's fate, then the symbols of despair are piled one upon another, until in its thirteenth stanza the poem sinks into apathy. Then "with a suddenness beyond surprise" comes the psychic revolution and mystical enlightenment—but ineffable enlightenment, which cannot be communicated, for "something heavy and as old as clay" lays hold upon the quest so that it falls, "just baffled of its goal." The post-hypnotic effects of the mystic trance remain, however, in, sings Pratt:

. . . . I had caught the sense
Of life with high auroras, and the flow
Of wide, majestic spaces.

This is about as near as the mystic can come to communication. The confines of mortality return, and the poet is aware

Of blindness falling with terrestrial day
On sight enfeebled by the solar glare,

So that "The Iron Door" closes upon an unanswered question. We still do not know

Why the one who should have been redeemed
Should also pay the price
In mutual sacrifice.

Pratt, leaving his mysticism behind, answered the question sixteen years later in "The Truant."

Fortunately for Canadian poetry, Pratt made a swift recovery from mysticism, something which Blake never managed to do. But "The Iron Door" remains one of the most impressive Canadian lyrics. It is also one of the few successful grand exercises in the romantic technique since the death of France

Thompson. Pratt's lyrics are a unique part of our literature, lacking the passion of traditional lyrics, but possessing formal perfection, like pieces of gothic in miniature.

No people deserves nationhood until the soul of a nation has been born within it. Although he has not yet received due recognition from other countries, Pratt is part of that soul in Canada, where he appeared at the most opportune time and became the first poet of real consequence.