E.J. Pratt as Lyricist

by Edna Froese

In his biographical comments on E.J. Pratt during the 1977 Pratt Symposium, Ralph Gustafson reported that Pratt "more than once wondered aloud if his personal lyrics must pass unnoticed" (*Symposium* 5). Pratt might well still wonder if his personal lyrics are passing unnoticed, for criticism generally has concentrated on his longer poetic narratives that fascinate the reader by giving mythological shape to essentially Canadian stories (the building of the railroad, the Jesuit missionary effort, the experience of the wars, as well as the rescues at sea and the constant conflict with nature). Pratt's ability to work in the epic mode and his preoccupation with ideas seem to beg for discussions about universal themes,[1] and if critics deal with Pratt's shorter poetry at all it is to rifle it for quotes to support the larger themes they see in his long narrative poetry. Pratt's work certainly lends itself readily to surveys of large heroic themes, but at least part of the reason for such a focus is that his narrative poetry, while shocking many readers of the time with its energy and boisterous humour ("The Witch's Brew" in particular), nevertheless fits into a recognizable genre and his heroes can be easily compared with canonical models. But what is to be done with his shorter poetry? Pratt may have referred to his "personal lyrics" (or is the term Gustafson's? In *On His Life and Poe* fry Pratt speaks more often of shorter poems than of lyrics), but those "lyrics" do not fit common conceptions of lyrical poetry, then or now. Any discussion of Pratt as lyricist must deal with the issue that Germaine Warkentin articulated in "The Aesthetics of E.J. Pratt's Shorter Poems": is a poet to be evaluated in terms of a pre-existing norm, or in terms of his ability to adapt a changing, evolving norm to his purposes? (17-18).

That many critics have chosen to discuss, and often dismiss, Pratt as lyricist according to lyric standards set by Romantic poets is evident. John Sutherland, for example, states:

> Undeniably. . . [Pratt] has limitations that become most apparent when he abandons narrative for a shorter form. It would be worthwhile to analyze the process by which the qualities which serve him so well in his narrative work cease to be an asset, or become a hindrance, in his short poems. Pratt's imagination is a cumulative one that demands the maximum space in which to develop a whole series of ideas or images. He does not possess the power for the striking individual line or the varieties of sensuous texture that characterize the lyrical poet. He casts his theme in the heroic mould and the dimensions of the lyric are too narrow for him. Nor does he have a subtle enough sense of form to achieve consistently the finish and completeness that are required. (165)

Frank Davey appears to value the expression of subjective emotion rather than the "finish and completeness" Sutherland expects from

lyrics. In fact, Davey criticizes all of Pratt's poetry, epics included, for their rationality, objective stance, and rhetorical dexterity:

> An examination of Pratt's work reveals that he shares Smith's concept of the poet as a detached, dispassionate observer, that he believes in the myth of poetic objectivity. He appears to view the universe as rationally ordered, and to see the poet's task as consciously imparting a similar order to the creative work. Above all, Pratt . . . can be seen to stand outside rather than inside his poetic materials, shaping them through sensibility and intelligence, rationally confronting "problems" of convention, language, and form.
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> ("Rationalist Technician" 65)

For Davey the lyric voice is an individual one, a voice that Pratt does not have: "The world of E.J. Pratt is a world where the individual voice, the lyric voice, is obligated to be silent, where gangs, crews, religions, and nations succeed and private men die" ("Corporate Man" 65). E.K. Brown is more sympathetic toward Pratt than Davey but still does not see in Pratt that expression of individual emotion which he also expects in the lyric:

> If some of [Pratt's] lyrics are admirable, his range in this kind of poetry is extraordinarily limited. Love and passion play an almost negligible part in Pratt's poetry . . . When Pratt does, now and then, speak of love in his lyrics, the note is very gentle and the effect is weak. He takes his place with the other masters of Canadian poetry in shying away from the expression of passion. . . . Nor is Pratt a nature lyricist.
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> (Pitt, ed. *E.J. Pratt*, 35-6)

Brown concludes that Pratt can manage the meditative lyric and the humorous lyric but his real strength is clearly in the narrative poems. The general uneasiness Pratt's shorter poetry creates for those unwilling to see familiar genre boundaries transgressed is aptly summed up by Harold Horwood: "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" (108).

Though Pratt's shorter poems are often denigrated as being too objective and impersonal, lacking emotion and intensity, I would argue that when Pratt's poems are read as individual works of art on their own terms — as Warkentin suggested though she did not carry that suggestion further into a careful analysis of the prosody and language[2] — they reveal a complexity worthy of the lyrical form. Furthermore, though it may be necessary to coin a new term to describe Pratt's peculiar rendering of emotional intensity, I would agree with Robert Gibbs, who in "A True Voice: Pratt as a Lyric Poet," pointed out that Pratt is not devoid of emotion, but masks that emotion behind irony and understatement. It is precisely his impersonal, controlled prose together with the ambiguous, ironic reversals at the end of many of his shorter poems that create a sense of passion repressed, and it

is his effacing of the individual specific viewpoint that allows him to evoke common agonies and dilemmas. To understand the strengths of Pratt in his shorter poems, then, I plan to concentrate on a selection of his more well-known poems, examining his technical skill or polish (that finish and completeness Sutherland was looking for), his use of irony, the effect of understatement, and the implications of the seemingly impersonal, detached persona he most often adopts.

The performance of Pratt's verse has been commented upon frequently, especially in reference to "Newfoundland," in which sound and sense, rhetorical structure and thematic content are so inextricably intertwined the poem could be a set-piece for a New Critical manual. The tides ebb and flow through the words of the first stanza: the enjambment of the lines, "Not with that dull, unsinewed tread of waters / Held under bonds to move / Around unpeopled shores. . . ," forces the voice to rise and fall but always within the tension ("held . . . to move") created by the lack of pauses where pauses would be expected because of the rhythm of the tide and the end of the line. Such inherent tension of conflicting expectations — that mirrors the tension between nature and people or, more specifically, between nature without people and nature in interaction with people — occurs again and again in the three major stanzas: for example, the contradictory sense of "harmonies of new floods" (floods are chaotic, uncontrolled, not harmonious) juxtaposed with "broken rhythms from old chords." Throughout, the sounds of the words and the rhythms of phrases (the poem is full of music and references to music) create as well as signify the sounds and the rhythms of the tide and the wind against the shores.

These rhythms are not the same throughout; rather the andantes, largoes, and allegrettos are orchestrated by Pratt in a repetitive, highly rhetorical structure in order to create a presence that is not actually there. Negative and positive clauses are set up in deliberate antithesis in each main stanza: "Here the tides (winds, crags). . . not with" followed by "but . . . ," an opposition that is reinforced by different rhythms. That structure links nature indissoluably with people: ocean and wind and crag behave differently when people are not present. Even the description of nature puts the focus on people with the repeated "un" or "in" phrases ("unsinewed tread," "untrodden shores," "insentient seas") and the anthropomorphism of the active verbs. The subtle change of mood between the main stanzas and the italicized ones, which nevertheless are unified by similar images of ''tide and wind and crag," "hearts," and music, suggests a human observer caught between exultation in nature's "partnership with life" and grief over the broken rudders washed up from the "waters of death."[3] Though not a single live human being walks through this poem, that very absence sharpens our awareness of people. Nature is less than itself without people and people are dynamically changed by nature.

Such technical skill is for some critics a mark of good lyrical poetry and for others an indication of cold-bloodedness inappropriate for lyrical poetry.[4] The relationship between prosodic skill and emotional intensity, central to most definitions of lyrical poetry, becomes particularly problematic for readers of Pratt. Dorothy Livesay, in "The Polished Lens: Poetic Techniques of Pratt and Klein," highlights a difficulty felt in Pratt but not always

recognized by readers, the absence of adjectives and the preponderance of nouns "[dangled] from the hooks of prepositions" (36). Besides creating a monotonous rhythm with those "of the" phrases, the absence of adjectives and adverbs makes it difficult "to appeal to the sense. And where, in Pratt's poetry, is there any evocation of touch, taste, hearing, scent?" (Livesay 36). There is a great deal of justice in this criticism (Pratt himself admitted avoiding adjectives in reaction to eighteenth century abuse of adjectives as mere "filler" [*On His Lift and Poetry* 52-3]), but I would like to qualify it somewhat. Pratt does make us hear the music of nature, as I have already pointed out, but he almost never lets us touch, taste, or smell, the senses often connected with feeling because of the physical contact involved. The only line in "Newfoundland" that lets us taste is "salt as tears." The absence of all other sensuousness in this poem makes this one line stand out all the more, giving the impression of deeply-felt emotion rigidly suppressed. It is not the emotion of one death, or one specific tragedy; it is the accumulated ache of the human condition that always means broken rudders, tangled and crushed shells, and open doors. Some of these objects left on the beach, such as the fragile shells described as having backs and faces, hearts and veins, evoke the pain of the human situation without actually describing it. The open doors, too, are just one detail that suggest whole narratives of hope and disappointment, a literal and figurative open-endedness that undermines the carefully ordered structure of the poem.[5]

That controlled (or perhaps "repressed" or "refracted") emotion evident in prosodic orchestration is even more intense, certainly more complex in "Still Life." Initially this poem creates a particularly strong sense of Pratt as manipulative poet playing with conventions and glorying in wit, but his exploitation of metric expectations and symbolic associations replaces the wit with deadly chill. Pratt employs jingly anapests in a largely iambic poem often directly before or after words that temporarily halt the regular rhythm altogether, as though the reader were being invited to do a light dance and were continually brought up against a wall:

> To the poets who have fled
> To pools where little breezes dusk and shiver,
> Who need still life to deliver
> Their souls of their songs,

The first two lines trip daintily enough but "still life" slows the tongue sufficiently to allow it to fall upon "deliver" with an emphasis that evokes still birth, not life.[6] Since "deliver" rhymes with "shiver," very obvious in a poem with intermittent, unpredictable rhyme, the shivering suddenly becomes part of a reaction to unexpected, premature death, not merely a description of "little breezes." The second stanza again sets up expectations only to undermine them: obvious double, sometimes feminine, rhyme makes the ear hear a light musical sound — "Metric paragraphs, Western epitaphs," "Waiting to trouble, Ukrainian stubble, Stalingrad rubble" — while the mind must begin to absorb a shocking tragedy. The incongruity between the tripping metre at the beginning of each stanza and tales of death (not heroic death or romantic, "Lady-of-Shalott" death, but ironic, mindless slaughter) makes Pratt's point that poetry should not be either an escape from politics or an indulgence of

private emotion that seems superficial in comparison to the larger reality of human suffering, but must be politically, painfully relevant.

The incongruity is also created by expectations set up through numerous allusions to earlier poetic traditions. Whereas in "Newfoundland" Pratt focuses on objects with poignant connotations, in "Still Life" Pratt deliberately evokes pleasantness through recognized romantic symbols only to subvert both symbols and emotions with unexpected associations. Roses should not be *blanched,* nor are "Orient gardens" normally visualized as "the mud of the Yellow River." Drawing flowers on urns is an innocuous enough artistic activity, but Pratt's choice of the archaic "limn" to designate the act of drawing, homophonically implies "limb," perhaps dismembered, and visually suggests "lime," which will be needed more for the mass grave about to be exposed than for the decorative, poetic urns, whether they hold ashes or not. Allusions to the wit of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry ("Hasten, for time may pass you by", "Go, find a cadence. . .") suggest a detachment from emotional involvement, a detachment that in this context is appalling, as if the poet were dancing on the edge of that mass grave. I read this poem as dealing with feelings too overwhelming to be rendered directly, but the very indirectness of Pratt's dispassionate manipulation of symbols creates an intensity that grows with each reading. His rhetorical dexterity, far from creating rational distance, becomes instead a vehicle for passion. Unfortunately, in that last stanza contrivance outweighs painful relevance, for after the "field-grey mould" Pratt allows himself to pile up the allusions without undercutting them so that for me the emotion is dissipated, and the sense of the bitter, ironic voice is lost.

That role of the voice, or persona, in Pratt's poetry is of utmost importance, for while the conventional definition of lyric poetry includes the notion of a speaker giving a subjective response to his/her situation, Pratt is usually described as being objective, "stand[ing] outside rather than inside his poetic material" ("Rationalist Technician" 65). Pratt himself saw a distinction between subjective poetry and objective poetry but defined it in terms of form and content rather than voice and where it was situated:

> In subjective poetry — lyrics, songs, hymns, odes, personal sonnets, and the like . . . [i]t is the mood and the music, the turn of phrase, the magic of words, that we look for. But when we enter the realm of objective poetry, descriptive, narrative, epic, dramatic, the knowledge of the subject is related to the aesthetic value of the result.
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> (*On His Life and Poetry* 19)

It is probably not surprising, then, that questions about persona and the relation of that persona to the material in the poem are not at the forefront of consciousness when one reads Pratt's shorter poems. Robert Gibbs, who is one of the rare critics to talk about voice in Pratt, analyses several of Pratt's poems, looking in each case for the identity of the persona and finding it in the mood or tone of the poem, rather than in any dramatically constructed entity or conscious mask. It is indeed difficult in most of Pratt's poems to detect an

identifiable speaker located in a particular situation. In "Still Life", for example, the voice uses "we" but gives no indication who that "we" might be, although the pronoun quickly takes on the authoritative cast of the royal "we" as though the persona is speaking on behalf of several people, dramatically addressing a group of poets, though readers are intended to overhear. The persona's personal presence is masked, yet his passionate anger, and that of the implied author, about the "hundred thousand dead" can be felt despite, or rather through, the pose of a detached connoisseur of poetry. In "Erosion" and in 'The Lee-Shore" questions about the speaker seem irrelevant. What we find is an impersonal story-teller, one who registers events with minimal interpretation. That is not to be taken as an evasion of emotion though, as Gibbs points out: "The power in such lyrics rests largely in their anonymity, in the fact that the feeling comes across as true and is shared by whomever reads or sings them" (120).[7] Moreover, despite the anonymity of the speaker a sense of sympathy is clearly implied by the restrained diction. Emotion is evoked rather than expressed.

Northrop Frye, in his address "Silence in the Sea," clarifies Pratt's role as such an "anonymous" poet. He maintains that Pratt "takes on many of the characteristics of an oral and preliterate society" where it is the professional oral poet who knows the traditions, the legends, the "proverbial philosophy," the stories of gods and heroic people (124). David Pitt's biography of Pratt (1.18-19) tells of the limited books available to Newfoundland children and the strong sense of community among the families clustered together on the rocks at the edge of the ocean. It was definitely a setting in which the village story teller held an unusual place of respect as chief entertainer, but also as one who gave voice and form to the feelings and experiences of the entire community. As Frye puts it, "such a poet is a profoundly impersonal poet. He does not write love poetry or cultivate his private emotions; he hardly thinks of himself as a personality separate from his public" (125). Seeing Pratt as such a voice for a distinct community and even for an entire generation grappling with the opposition between long-held Christian views and the rise of scientific technology, or more immediately with the contradiction between a loving God and endless deaths caused by inanimate nature, takes the pejorative sting out of the term "objective" poetry, for it is not that Pratt refuses emotion but that he chooses to register the emotions of a community rather than his own. Whether or not Pratt consciously saw himself as an oral poet speaking for a community,[8] he certainly did deliberately avoid statements of personal feeling: "I have never seen the value of *exclusive* self-expression. There is too much implicit contempt for the reader if the poet compels him — after reading a poem — to ask, 'What is the writer thinking about?' (*On His Life and Poetry* 36, italics mine). Even if seeing Pratt as such a public poet solves part of the problem of voice, it does not, however, do justice to the ambiguity embedded in his best poems, that ironic critique of factually presented events or ideas that suggests a personal voice, albeit much disguised.

Pratt's ironic voice has already been alluded to in the discussion of "Still Life" in which his subversion of traditional symbols and selected phrases from canonical poems, and the disjunction between metre and events described create a sense of horror at the

detachment of so-called lyric poets. An even more Prattian deployment of irony is the abrupt reversal at the end of poems that calls into question whatever order and objectivity has been established in the body of the poem.[9] 'The Man and the Machine" is an excellent example. A quick first reading of the poem gives us an easily recognizable picture of a man delighting in a new machine, even working together in a unique "kinship" developed over the years of evolutionary development from smelting ore to making steel. The last two lines, however, "This creature with the cougar grace, / This man with slag upon his face," change the tone of the poem completely. The contrast between "creature" and "man" with the implication of created and creator forces us back to the very first line, "By right of fires. . ." (are these Promethean fires?) and questions the man's ability to exercise the divine right of creating. What has been created is not totally inanimate either, nor is it clear whether these fires carry whiffs of hell, or promises of purification and enlightenment, or whether they merely refer to the raw energetic force of life ("pathways of authentic fires") suggested in "Newfoundland." Even more striking is that the words characterizing the man all indicate disease or malfunction. Pratt, as has already been mentioned, used adjectives very sparingly; these adjectives (warped, bent, lesioned) are no mere "filler." The variation in rhyme, couplets except for one set, serves to place deliberate emphasis on "shot" — a preparation for the blow to the gut that is about to come! In fact, the "knot" itself that rhymes with "shot," placed strategically at the end of the line, appears to suggest union between "nerves and sinews" but actually describes "spasm:"

> He felt his lesioned pulses strum
> Against the rhythm of her hum,
> And found his nerves and sinews knot
> With sharper spasm as she climbed
> The steeper grades, so neatly timed
> From storage tank to piston shot —

The ironic voice has been functioning throughout in a mocking critique of mechanical creation. If one takes into account the gendering of the machine as female and pays attention to the increased intensity as man and machine climb to the top of the grade after which a distinct falling off occurs, "spasm" and "shot" take on yet more meaning! The persona's wry laughter carries a note of understanding sympathy, though, not only anger.

"From Stone to Steel" demonstrates another strategic reversal, this time from a cynical ironic stance throughout to an unexpected note of compassion and hope at the end. The usual debunking function of irony is the norm of this poem, conflating all of human history into two positions: atavistic brutality ("snarl Neanderthal," "cave," "desire," "matur[ing] a toxic wine") and sophisticated brutality masked by religion ("Aryan lips," "praying finger tips," "temple"). The hopelessness of creating any distance between temple and cave is underlined by the preposterous image, "The yearlings still the altars crave / As satisfaction for a sin;" even the victims are complicit in this travesty of religion. And the relentlessly cheerful iambic rhythm seems to trivialize the cynicism, setting at a distance what narrative presence is there, until the last two lines simultaneously slow the rhythm and introduce an alternative not even hinted at elsewhere in the poem. Gethsemane, that moment of deliberate

decision to sacrifice oneself in order to put an end to both temple and sacrifice of victims, that moment in which the broad "road" is forsaken in favour of the narrow "path,"[10] is the only possible alternative to the mindless roll of the wheel from one form of brutality to another. Though Pratt has maintained the detached pose of a cosmic viewer he has nevertheless affirmed individual choice, one that requires deep engagement with the woes of others, as an antidote to collective desire and guilt.[11]

The function of irony and its relation to voice is more complex in "Come Away, Death." Allusiveness here combines with Pratt's ironic deflating of expectations to create an ambiguity that carries no hint of hopeful resolution but is made more disturbing by the progression (or regression) from medieval death to modern annihilation as experienced by a specific community. The title brings to mind the song the clown sings in *Twelfth Night,* a song about death chosen because of love denied,[12] an appropriate song for the romantic, self-indulgent Duke lost in admiration of his own love for Olivia, but the phrase "willy-nilly" comes from the gravedigger in *Hamlet* digging Ophelia's grave. Her death too was chosen because of love denied but the mood is grim. Death then comes in comedy and in tragedy, its logic as irrational and arbitrary as the clown's, though not yet as irrational and arbitrary as that chosen for others through the bombing raids described in the latter part of the poem. Such a contrast between the romanticized "literary" deaths (given ritualistic status and dignity in the second stanza) and the sordid slaughter of war evokes the same incredulous shock created in "Still Life." The transition between the two views of death is provided by the subtle irony of the third stanza by which illusions are destroyed and ritual's failure to prevent or even mask man's atavistic impulses is exposed. Pratt initially describes death as a formal visitor who "led the way to his cool longitudes / In the dignity of the candles," but now death's "medieval grace is gone. . . / Under the gride of his traction tread." Actually, the irony is operative from the beginning of the stanza. Death did not always have grace, even in medieval times: "the flame of the capitals," while referring to the heavily illuminated capital letters of ancient manuscripts, refers with equal accuracy to the burning of capital cities and/or the heretics within them, and "the leisured turn of the thumb" (notice how the end of the line emphasizes that thumb) may well be thumbscrews (Evolutionary Vision 75). The final lines of the fourth stanza are worth noting here:

> A calm condensed and lidded
> As at the core of a cyclone ended breathing.
> This was the monologue of Silence
> Grave and unequivocal.

The equivocal meaning of "grave" is reminiscent of the techniques Pratt used in "Still Life;" the contradictory "monologue of Silence" echoes "Silences" in which Pratt most clearly presents his thesis that speech is what sets human beings apart from brutes and mitigates their hatred. In such a silence Gethsemane cannot be mentioned. By focusing on silence or absence Pratt evokes what should ideally be there, giving emotional force to the blankness of "hieroglyphs / On mouths and eyes and cheeks."

The notion of absence, a more appropriate term for Pratt even than understatement, is what transforms the ironic voice in Pratt's poetry into one that is not at all emotionally detached but whose engagement with the problem or event is stoically controlled, as though the speaker would like to affirm Stoicism's view of life as providentially determined ("Nothing is harmful to the part which is advantageous to the whole. For the whole contains nothing which is not advantageous to itself. . . . As long as I remember that I am a part of such a whole I shall be well content with all that happens" {Marcus Aurelius quoted in Long 165}), but is unable to achieve such contentment in the face of suffering that defies rational explanation. Emotion is implied, not openly articulated; silence becomes as eloquent as speech. "Erosion" is perhaps the best example, though poems already discussed would serve as well. The implied narrative is that of a ship lost at sea. We are not told how many men drowned, or how long and anxiously their wives awaited news of them. Not a word is said of fear, of tears, of anger, of God for that matter and what view of Him can be accepted when tragedy strikes. The very word "tragedy" is not mentioned, nor is any spoken word recorded. Erosion occurs in silence. The image of the thousand-year-old granite seams being placed on a woman's face is enough to indicate the unknown persona's sympathy and the woman's unspoken pain. Pratt has related the experience out of which this poem was born, that of accompanying his father "to break the news." He has also said: "[poetry] came best out of the imagination working upon the material of actual experience. My aim was to get the emotional effect out of the image or the symbol operating on the facts of sense perception" (*On His Life and Poetry* 33). Could any specific description of a named woman's sorrow convey emotion more effectively than the symbol of silent erosion? Similarly, in "Newfoundland" the image of crags like mastiffs guarding too well, or of "doors held ajar in storms" (surely the record of an irrational distracted action), or in "Silences" the image of the "unvocal sea . ., where the lids never close upon the eyes," the emotional effect is created more by what is implied, or indeed, repressed, than by what is actually said.

To label Pratt's shorter poetry as "stoic lyricism" might then be an appropriate way of acknowledging both the impersonality of Pratt's tight control of imagery and technique, and the intense emotional effects that result. Certainly poems such as "Erosion" and "Newfoundland" with their emphasis on the order of nature and the implied unity between humanity and nature would fit into such a sub-genre. I have already noted some echoes in "Newfoundland" of Stoic belief, and Pratt's poem, "The Stoics," further indicates a familiarity with and interest in Stoicism. In fact, several lines from that poem — "Their *gravitas* had seized a geologic centre / And triumphed over subcutaneous pain," "What are the Stoic answers?" "We have tried but failed to make / That cool unflawed retreat" — suggest a basic agreement with the Stoic belief in the need to suppress passions in order to allow reason to guide the individual into right moral choices (Urmson 308). On the other hand, the familiar Prattian irony at work in "The Stoics" (what appears initially to be an appeal to Stoic values becomes a "fools' mistake for gold;" Stoic answers are ultimately useless in the face of "screaming comets in the skies"), as well as in other poems such as "Come Away Death" and "Still Life," expresses outrage and despair at the whole-sale suffering humanity brings upon itself. The "ferments ratting underneath our skin" cannot be disciplined, nor can the Stoic notion of an ordered, unified

universe be maintained when even "civilian flesh" is entangled in the "traction of the panzers." Paradoxically, the effort and subsequent failure of the persona to maintain Stoic calm testifies both to great passion and the moral necessity of that passion. To make a "cool unflawed retreat" would be as reprehensible as to flee to "pools where little breezes dusk and shiver" when a hundred thousand have died in war ("Still Life"). The tension within the designation of "stoic lyricism" resembles the tension within Pratt's shorter poems: emotion is expressed through the very intensity of the effort needed to suppress it.

In summary then, if lyric poetry is defined as subjective, personal poetry with a focus on the feeling "I," especially as that "I" functions within a specific human relationship, Pratt is not a lyricist. His shorter poems do not contain intimate relationships, except as obliquely suggested. What happens between men and women is either occasion for gentle wit as in "Like Mother Like Daughter"[13] or follows the folk-tale pattern of wife waiting stoically at home for a husband who never returns ("Erosion," "The Lee-Shore"). David Pitt, in Pratt's biography (2. 131-32) does mention two poems in which Pratt, rather indirectly, deals with the physical passion of man and woman. One, "The Inexpressible," was never published and the other was eventually published under the title of "To Any Astronomer." Without Pitt's gloss on the poems no one would recognize them as having anything to do with human bodies! Other relationships, such as parent-child (except in "Rachel," an early longer narrative, or "Myth and Fact"), or friendship, are also largely missing. Louis Dudek has explained this absence of intimate emotional relationships by defining Pratt as a poet of the Machine Age:

> Pratt . . . has expressed through his very metrics and his personality the beat of pistons, the metallic clangour of wheels, and the apparently unreflective energy of matter.
>
> If this poetic quality, the apparent materialism and the reductive zoological outlook, should sometimes seem truncated and strangely circumscribed to the seasoned philosophical reader or critic, he might consider that the reason for this may lie, not in the poet, but in the mechanical culture and the science for which he is a responsive voice. (94)

Like Frye, Dudek sees Pratt as an oral poet, a public poet who expresses the thoughts, feelings, and philosophy of his age, an age in which human relationships are increasingly devalued.

That Pratt is such a responsive voice for his community and culture rather than a personal voice exploring individual experience is clear enough, I think, (though we need to remember that "responsive" does not mean only uncritical echo) but such an evaluation does not go far enough, nor is it sufficient grounds for denying Pratt the emotional depth and complexity usually expected of lyrical poetry. As I have argued, it is through his prosodic ability to create evocative ambivalent symbols, his persistent irony which frequently depends upon unsettling shifts between the evolutionary and Christian paradigms or between romantic and contemporary frameworks of poetic expression, and his management of absences as well as minimal

presences, that Pratt creates a unique lyrical voice fully capable of emotional intensity that ranges from playful wit to deepest mourning. That the emotion wears the garment of anonymity and the mask of stoic control does not diminish its validity.

Notes

1. Typical of Pratt criticism are books such as Wells and Klinck's *Edwin J. Pratt, the Man and His Poetry,* which analyzes Pratt's main poems in comparison to, Greek epics; Sandra Djwa's *The Evolutionary Vision;* and comments such as S. Gingell's in *Profiles in Canadian Literature:* "Pratt's universe is a universe in conflict, where forces of nature contend with one another, and where man contends against an often cruel external nature or his own bestial instincts that lead him into conflict with other men" (73); or A.J.M. Smith's: "Pratt is fascinated with magnitude, with immense strength and almost incredible power, natural, monstrous or human, and with geographical if not astronomical distance." (Pitt 139). [back]

2. Warkentin chose to discuss the larger issue of Pratt's development of the relation of theme and form, a discussion that was needed in order to lay the foundation for the more specific readings I plan to do. [back]

3. It seems to me that it would be a fruitful exercise (though beyond the scope of this paper) to compare "Newfoundland" with Stoicism's understanding of the universe and the role of people within it. According to A.A. Long, Stoics believed that "because cosmic nature embraces all that there is, the human individual is a part of the world in a precise and integral sense" (108). Nature and people are ordered/unified "according to the universal reason or *logos* which is in control, apparently by virtue of a *pneuma* which animates and controls all matter . . . [F]ire was held to be the central element relating to all other elements [cf. "pathways of authentic fires"], the whole exhibiting a harmonious tension" (Reese 551). Certainly the tension Pratt sets up between an ordered, unified universe and the human experience of pain and destruction resembles the tensions Stoicism sought to reconcile. [back]

4. Sutherland, in the quotation given above, seeks "finish and completeness" but also "sensuous" texture. Davey, in "E.J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician," sees a definite conflict between the expression of emotion and Pratt's rational working out of problems of language and form (65, 68). [back]

5. I cannot agree with Birbalsingh, who saw "Newfoundland" as a celebration of God's control aver the universe creating "cyclical, cosmic harmony" (76), though such a description would support the suggestion that "Newfoundland" echoes Stoic sentiments, because of the cumulative effect of the images and the ambiguous even subversive closure. [back]

6. "Go, find a cadence for that *field-grey mould / Outcropping*" (italics mine) is another example of a light-hearted

rhythm brought to an abrupt halt in order to emphasize conflicting associations: surely the Acropolis would be white, not militarily grey; Greek art should exude glory, not mould. [back]

7. Gibbs is referring to "Come Not the Seasons Here" which he sees as a mostly playful exercise in conventional poetic skills, but the comment applies even more forcefully to poems such as "Erosion."[back]

8. The penultimate stanza of "Come Away, Death" is one example of a deliberate recording of community experience: "we heard his footfall . . . . / In the outskirts of a village near the sea."[back]

9. Gibbs refers to Pratt's "truant impulse" that breaks out of the fixed order of "the external form and rhetoric of the poem" (121). I am indebted to Gibbs for his discussion of Pratt's technique of over-turning initial arguments, but I would also move beyond noting this "playful impulse," which I agree is there, to looking at the operation of that irony throughout the poem. The truant impulse often informs the entire poem.[back]

10. See Matt. 7:13-14.[back]

11. A similar shift from ironic mockery of man's brutality to the hopeful "plasma from Gethsemane" occurs in "Cycles." Here Pratt's irony gains force from Biblical allusions ("We need no more the light of day / No need of faces to be seen" originally refers to heaven when God's face will be seen in the light of his own glory {Rev. 22:4-5}, not to the precision of radar), a play of dichotomies of light and dark, and from alliteration and rhyme. [back]

12. These sources are pointed out in Djwa's "The 1920s: E.J. Pratt, Transitional Modern" (64-65) and in the notes to *E.J. Pratt: Complete Poems*, Vol. 2.[back]

13. Gibbs points out, and rightly, that playfulness too is a mark of a feeling human being (121). To assume that only pain or love qualify as suitably emotional subjects for lyrics is to narrow unreasonably the possibilities of the genre.[back]

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