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Man and Religion in the Poetry of E. J. Pratt

This thesis attempts to show that the role of religion in the lives of the men of Pratt's narrative poetry is significant in an analysis of heroism. Through an exploration of the poet's personal concept of religion, biographically and in the poetry, it becomes apparent that the example of Christ is established as a criterion by which human action can be judged. The heroic actions of the human figures of the major narratives are often prompted by faith. Pratt's primary focus, however, was on man and his potential. The protagonists of the poetry are always committed to a particular course of action, and it is their commitment which produces heroic and self-sacrificial action. Through a personal faith or code all men are inherently capable of performing acts which sublimate personal welfare to the general good. E. J. Pratt's poetry is a celebration of human potential.

Man and Religion in the Poetry of E. J. Pratt

Man and Religion in the Poetry of E. J. Pratt.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

by

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Department of English.

McGill University. April, 1970.

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Excluding the various collected and selected editions of his work, E. J. Pratt published fifteen volumes of poetry during a writing career which extended over forty years. Given this fact, it is surprising that the body of critical opinion on his work is relatively small. Until the early 1940's, most of the criticism was in the form of short notices and reviews which appeared shortly after the publication of each volume. (The notable exception is W. E. Collin's The White Savannahs, Toronto, 1936). After the end of the Second World War, several longer articles and even books began to appear, and it seemed that Pratt was finally receiving due critical attention. Articles by Henry W. Wells and John Sutherland were important factors in prompting other critics to consider Pratt's work. Ultimately, however, it is not a question of quantity but of the quality of that criticism which must be confronted. For the most part, the tendency was to attempt to summarize and explain all of Pratt's work in a short article. Major difficulties were left unconsidered. The most recent studies have limited their scope to a few of the major poems, major in importance, not necessarily in length; and for that reason they have been more specific and generally more useful. (Of particular value have been the Pratt Lectures delivered at Memorial University in 1968 by Northrop Frye, and in 1969 by A.J.M. Smith). There still remain questions

of major importance about Pratt's writings which are largely unanswered.

Characteristic of the critical essays which attempt to summarize all of Pratt's poetry in a few pages is the tendency to make wide-ranging generalizations. The most frequent and misleading subject of this trait has to do with Pratt's concept or philosophy of man. For the most part the actions of the human figures in the poetry are seen simply as 'heroic.' A specific concept of heroism is seen to be the answer to all problems concerning human agents appearing in the poetry. Although certain critics have occasionally suggested that perhaps there is a deeper concept of Man underlying the poetry, as yet none has seized the opportunity to analyse it.

This paper, then, seeks to explore the human figures in the poetry of E. J. Pratt, and to attempt to explain their motivation toward heroic action. The assumption is made that the actions of a Brébeuf are seen to be different in degree but not in kind from those of the men on the sealing or fishing vessels which travel out of Newfoundland outports. Pratt's concentration in the poetry is on men who are inherently capable of performing deeds which sublimate the self to the general good. This paper is an attempt to define Pratt's philosophy of man, and to determine whether this self-sacrificial human quality is based on inborn natural

courage; is an automatic human reaction; or is prompted by some mystical or religious belief.

Although E. J. Pratt received all his post-secondary school education in Toronto, and spent all of his teaching career in that city, he did not leave Newfoundland until he was twenty-five. Various factors of biography inextricably bound him to the life and people of that unique island.[1] The pattern of the Methodist ministry of that time necessitated the changing of pastoral charges every three years, and all of Pratt's father's career was spent in a succession of small outport parishes. For this reason E. J. Pratt knew the pattern of life of the fishermen of the villages. His maternal grandfather had been a sea-captain, and stories of his adventures were commonly told in the manse. Danger and death were almost a way of life for the fishermen of Newfoundland, and the sea became both an ally and a foe. Of particular significance to Pratt as a child was his father's frequent obligation to tell families of the loss of a father, husband, or son. Later, when Pratt became a teacher in the outports, he was also obliged to become the bearer of these grave

1. The most useful biographical summary on Pratt is Carl Klinck's essay appearing in Edwin J. Pratt: The Man and his Poetry (Toronto, 1947). Other information can be found in the "Chronology" section of Professor Buitenhuis' volume, and in the essay "E. J. Pratt" in On Canadian Poetry by E. K. Brown, (Toronto, 1943).

messages. It was not just death and danger, however, which was to impress Pratt about the lives of the fishermen. He was also moved by their bravery, humour and self-reliance. Many years later, in his first volume of poetry, Newfoundland Verse, Pratt indicated how deep had been the influence of the people of the villages of Newfoundland on his view of mankind and its potential.[2]

In the first volume we find poems of various kinds which deal with many sides of life in Newfoundland. They range from comic to tragic, and from sonnet form to free verse. The most moving poem in the volume, and also one of the most anthologized, is a piece containing two sonnets and entitled "The Toll of the Bells." The poem is based on an actual event, the loss of the Greenland, which occurred when Pratt was a young child, and which obviously moved him greatly. Writing later in a prose piece, Pratt recalled the event:

> I was very young at the time, but it seems merely as yesterday when the ship came to St. John's with her freight of frozen bodies. The great memorial was held in the Anglican Cathedral, with several representative clergymen speaking messages of consolation to the immense congregation of mourners. The words burned into our souls as they described the struggle of the men on the floes, the pitched battle with the elements at their worst, and the ironic enigma of Nature and its relation to the Christian view of the world.[3]

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2. Newfoundland Verse, The Ryerson Press, (Toronto, 1923). All references will be to this edition. Unless otherwise noted, references to Pratt's poetry are taken from the first editions of the individual volumes.

3. "Memories of Newfoundland," The Book of Newfoundland, ed. J. R. Smallwood, (St. John's, 1937), II, p. 57.

The last phrase of Pratt's statement points out a dichotomy which was to permeate much of his later poetry, and which appeared in the first volume also. This is the problem of reconciling the Christian concept of a benevolent God with the unconquerable forces of nature which destroyed men and property. In "The Toll of the Bells," none of the outward signs of grief and recognition seemed to be adequate memorials to the dead. Even the special service in the cathedral did not seem to satisfy the quest of the mourners for inner peace. In fact, religion appeared to be ineffectual in providing consolation, since

> Sorrow
> Has raked up faith and burned it like a pile
> of driftwood, scattering the ashes while
> Cathedral voices anthemed God's To-morrow. (p.15)

Significantly it is "God's To-morrow", and not that of either the sailors in heaven, or the mourners on earth.

Pratt's familiarity with the liturgy of his church is clearly demonstrated in two poems which help to resolve this dichotomy of God's goodness and nature's destructiveness. In "The Toll of the Bells," Pratt refers to "The tidal triumph of Corinthians," a reference to a long passage of scripture which serves as a lesson at the funeral service for "The Burial of the Dead." [4] This passage is a stirring one, and was taken by Handel to form several of the movements of The Messiah, yet for Pratt and the mourners the words sound

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4. I Corinthians 15: 20-58.

hollow in their context. In another poem in Newfoundland Verse, "Before an Altar", a similar situation of questioning liturgy occurs, this time with reference to the eucharist:

> And on the salver lay
> The bread-there to remain.
> Perhaps, some other day,
> Shrovetide will come again.
>
> Blurred is the rubric now,
> And shadowy the token,
> When blood is on the brow,
> And the frail body broken. (pp. 105-106)[5]

A substantial hint as to the resolution of this apparent conflict between belief and practice is given in the next poem in the volume, "Snowfall on a Battle-Field," where snow falls on the bodies of dead soldiers, and appears to be

> Compassion of heaven,
> Tears from God's eyes,
> Falling so gently,
> Out of the skies. (p. 107)

The ultimate resolution, if there is in fact a resolution, appears to lie in the differentiation between the concept of God and the actions of his priests on earth. It is not God who is responsible for the lack of satisfaction with the liturgy, since man is the creator of the institutionalized church. In theory at least, the fishermen who died are in closer communion with God than are those who are seeking His solace through intermediaries. In a poem with a similar theme, "In Memoriam,"[6] the church does not form a part of

5. "Flashlights and Echoes", No. XIII.

6. Newfoundland Verse, pp. 110-11.

the mourning. The poet considers the mourning of fishermen for sons who have died in battle in the First World War. The resolution comes in the form of an affirmation of faith in God and afterlife, without the intervention of the institutionalized church. It is only in the period following death on a large scale that Pratt considers man in relation to God and the church. While alive, man is portrayed as a self-sufficient being in times both of joy and crisis.

In the Newfoundland Verse volume man is portrayed in some situations which are tragic and in others which are humourous. Human reaction under stress is of greater interest to Pratt, however, and more poems deal with serious scenes than with comic ones. The most exciting and moving poem of the former category in the volume is "The Ice-Floes," which is one of Pratt's most memorable pieces, and one which has appeared in all collected editions of his work. The situation is a common one for the seal-hunting Newfoundlanders. The pace of the hunt is fast, and the rhythm of the poem matches that speed. The poem describes the killing of thousands of baby seals, not sparing vivid depictions of the blood and pain involved. The poet's sympathy is nonetheless with the hunters since they are dependent on the revenue of the hunt. The killing is not malicious or blood-thirsty, it is necessary:

> With the rise of the sun we started to kill,
> A seal for each blow from the iron bill
> Of our gaffs. From the nose to the tail we
> ripped them,
> And laid their quivering carcases flat
> On the ice; then with our knives we stripped
> them
> For the sake of the pelt and its lining of fat.
> (p. 22)

The depiction of the hunters and their action is not set in an heroic context. The men of the hunt are shown doing the work that they know and understand, and upon which they depend for their existence. Thus the change in the weather is not an ironic reversal or the intrusion of fate, it is merely an encounter with nature which can always be expected by the men of the hunt. The presentation of the hunters in the situation of danger, separated from their ship, does not change the outlook of either the hunters or the narrator. With surprising calm the hunters attempt to find their ship, and only when nearly overcome with fatigue and cold do some of them panic. Even after the dawn breaks and the ship is finally sighted by the survivors the conclusion is characterized by understatement. As the floes separated, and men were drowned or carried off, the survivors reach the ship and the story is ended. There is no expression of grief, just a simple restatement of the motive of the hunt:

> And the rest is as a story told,
> Or a dream that belonged to a dim, mad past,
> Of a March night and a north wind's cold,
> Of a voyage home with a flag half-mast;

Of twenty thousand seals that were killed
To help lower the price of bread;
Of the muffled beat...of a drum...that filled
A nave...at our count of sixty dead. (p. 26)

We find no eulogy in these lines; neither is there any reference to relatives, God, or afterlife save the single mention of a church service through the word "nave." Of course it can be said that the dead hunters died heroically, yet from the point of view of the poet and the surviving hunters their deaths were all part of the expected scheme of life of the men who battle the elements for their livelihood. This may tend to give the impression that in his poems Pratt presented the Newfoundlanders as hard and unfeeling. A reading of the poem "Morning" from the "Flashlights and Echoes" section of Newfoundland Verse soon dispels this notion. This poem tells of a young Newfoundlander who has died in such a way that his body is battered and barely recognizable. The person who finds the body decides to try and spare the boy's mother some of the shock and agony she would experience:

This coat and cap will tell her all;
We'll get him buried by night-fall;
There is no need to tell her more --
That we found the body on the shore. (p. 94)

Pratt's first volume consisted primarily of recollections of his early life in Newfoundland and of memories of the people of the outport fishing villages. Many of the poems are essentially descriptions of the sea and the life in the sea. The people of the area were also a very important part of his

memories. The life of the fisherman and his family was a constant struggle against the unpredictable forces of the sea and the weather. Despite the difficult life which was experienced by the hard-working man of the sea, Pratt was also aware of the happiness and humour which also formed parts of the lives of Newfoundlanders. The series of five poems "Monologues and Dialogues" is one of the most useful summaries of Newfoundland life which appears in Pratt's work. It reveals not only much of the humour and attitudes of the Newfoundlanders, but also indicates Pratt's own view of man in this hard environment. The first and best-known poem in this section is "Carlo" which tells the story of a dog which saved over ninety lives by swimming ashore with a rope from a sinking boat. Although it is a fast-moving and comic poem, it reveals much of Pratt's concept of man and religion. In essence, Pratt states that any creature that is capable of performing an act which saves so many lives is man's equal and should be permitted entry to heaven. Pratt condemns the superior attitude of men who maintain that it was instinct which prompted Carlo's rescue:

> Gadsooks! It makes me sick to think
> That man must so exalt his race
> By giving dogs a servile place;
> Prate of his transcendentalism,
> While you save men by mechanism. (p. 44)

It must, of course, be remembered that much of the poem is purely comic, and an overly ingenious interpretat-

ion is unjustified. Yet it is difficult to refrain from thinking of the affinities evoked between the reader and the protagonists of The Cachalot and The Great Feud when one reads the lines

> Thus, I have heard some preachers say --
> Wise men and good in a sort o' way --
> Proclaiming from the sacred box
> (Quoting from Butler and John Knox)
> How freedom and the moral law
> God gave to man, because He saw
> A way to draw a line at root
> Between the human and the brute. (p. 43)

Pratt was unable to acknowledge so clear-cut a "line at root" between man and animal, particularly when he considered the evil of which man was capable. As is clear in his later poetry, Pratt adopted what has been called an "evolutionary metaphor." [7] The early traces of the view that man is not necessarily always superior to the animals can be seen in "Carlo." Also reappearing in the poem is the poet's dissatisfaction with organized religion. In the passage quoted above Pratt questions the wisdom of preachers and their sermons, and at the end of the poem he humourously satirizes the concept of heaven and St. Peter guarding the gates. "Carlo" is a highly significant poem, then, in that it questions the existence of an afterlife, indicates a lack of satisfaction with church and dogma, and points the way toward a strict definition of evolution and the manners in which man is superior to the lower species.

7. Peter Buitenhuis, Selected Poems of E. J. Pratt, (Toronto, 1968), introduction p. xiii.

The second poem in the series, "Overheard by a Pool", is a simple poem which gives insight into the character of the Newfoundlanders. It is very humourous, and indicates a characteristic propensity for exaggeration. The persona of the poem criticizes a fisherman of losing a fish the size and strength of which increases through the poem. The narrator of the poem bears a great similarity to the Old Salt of the next poem "Overheard in a Cove," in which two characters engage in a conversation. The Scholar and the Old Salt are both from the same village, but the former has returned after several years away at school. The two men are clearly differentiated by the language they employ and by the nature of their respective arguments. The Scholar is dependent on scientific explanations while the Old Salt reacts emotionally. It is on the question of religion that they disagree most fundamentally. The Scholar, "delivering le grand coup", states:

> Thanks to the scientist's imagination,
> The point is proven to a demonstration,
> Your patriarchal history is a fable
> A groundless fiction like your Tower of Babel,
> Your Samson or your Jonah. (pp. 62, 63)

The Old Salt is ultimately disgusted by the Scholar's words. He finds the latter's opinions too narrowly rational, unbending, and unwilling to accept compromise or dispute. The Old Salt finally dismisses the Scholar with the provoking taunt "I'm done with you, my lad - I stands by Moses."

Pratt is aware of the place that religion seemed to play in the life of the Newfoundlander. He understood that the church provided a needed source of inspiration to the men who faced death daily on the sea.

In the most comic of the poems in Newfoundland Verse, "The History of John Jones," Pratt manages to capture the essence of the comic side of the fishermen. Even in this poem the role of the church is evident. The poem is entirely humourous, and it is unwise to infer anything from it in terms of Pratt's view of heroic action. It does serve, however, to indicate the extent to whichPratt knew his men, and was able to understand and explain their actions. The volume as a whole is important for a study of all of Pratt's works since it tends to set the stage for the consideration of several topics which interested Pratt throughout his work. It is most revelatory for a consideration of Pratt's view of man since man is portrayed in various situations in the poem. We see him in sorrow and happiness, in action and at rest, praising and mourning. The questions of religion raised in Newfound land Verse are seen in later work, and some are resolved and others are not. To any consideration of Pratt's view of man and his religion, the first volume of poetry is of great significance.

Pratt's second volume of verse, The Witches' Brew, is the first of the poems which have been categorized as 'extravaganzas' in the collected works.[8]

8. The Witches' Brew, The MacMillan Company, (Toronto, 1926)

The term is well used since the poems are literally outside the normal realm of human activity. Since the major figures are outside the human situation, it would seem that their content would add nothing to a consideration of Pratt's concept of man and his motivating factors. This is, however, too limited an approach, since much of the action of the poem can be seen as a comment on the human condition. Most importantly, of course, is the fact that alcohol is a human invention, and should be foreign to the creatures of the sea. The cauldron used to mix the brew was forged by a blacksmith who was the product of a union of earth and water gods. He was, in one sense, a unique reversal of the evolutionary process and took with him human knowledge of craft which was instrumental in producing the alcoholic binge. The liquor itself was found by the witches because humans had fought over it for trivial reasons:

> The Spanish conquerors of Peru
> Had stored their rich and ancient wines,
> About the time the English burst
> Upon their galleons under Drake,
> Who sank or captured them to slake
> A vast Elizabethan thirst. (p. 11)

Not only does Pratt condemn the human passions aroused by liquor, but also he makes a significant comment about the mythology of the Christian religion. Pratt demonstrates clearly that he does not accept the orthodox view of heaven and hell. The inhabitants of the regions of afterlife are

portrayed as weak and comical. The smell of the brew was so permeating that

> It entered Hades, and the airs
> Resuscitated the Immortals;
> It climbed the empyrean stairs
> And drove St. Peter from the portals. (p. 16)

A subsequent reference to hell appears in the section of the poem called the "Inventory of Hades." From these stanzas it is clear that Pratt does not accept the concept of a punitive afterlife. Among the inhabitants of the lower regions are clergymen, Christians, and deacons, and it is obvious that no specific way of life or belief in God on earth is insurance for happiness in the hereafter. The most significant comment on man appears in the poem as a justification for the actions of the fish and the witches. Pratt ironically maintains that the orgy is not subject to condemnation since

> The fish transgressed no moral law,
> They had no principles, no creed,
> No prayers, no Bibles, and no Church,
> No Reason's holy light to read.
> The truth and no desire to search. (p.20)

Man is also capable of similar transgressions even though he has all the codes listed to guide him. In this sense man's failings should be severely critized since he has guides unavailable to lower species. In a semi-allegorical way, then, The Witches' Brew illustrates the capacity man has for failure.

It has been a tendency in some criticism of Pratt's

work to depend upon allegorical interpretation too heavily. John Sutherland's approach to Pratt's next volume, Titans (1926) is an illustration of this failing. [9] In his chapters on "The Cachalot" and "The Great Feud" Sutherland sees Pratt presenting a human situation using animal characters. Symbols of Christ and the human situation are found throughout the poems in a manner too ingenious to be convincing. There are points in both poems which are relevant to a consideration of Pratt's views of man and religion, but they are not obscure and do not require contrivance to be effective. "The Cachalot", for example, shows Pratt's increasing ability for narrative description of action, but without human heroics. The human figures in the poem are secondary and not clearly characterized. Their relevance is in terms of an attitude, not in individual actions. At the outset of the poem Pratt makes it clear that the focus of attention is the whale. The tracing of his lineage establishes the cachalot in the tradition of the ancient epic of which he is the hero. The action of the first two parts, in which the whale's adversaries are non-human, and in which the massive size and power of the whale are clearly outlined, evoke the reader's sympathies and prepare him to ally himself with a non-human, mammalian protagonist. The

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9. The Poetry of E. J. Pratt: A New Interpretation (Toronto, 1956.)

first hint of human actors in the drama comes at the end of the first part of the poem when wounds caused by harpoons are described. The poet dismisses the human factor as quickly as the whale dispensed with the whalers:

> The mute reminders of the hours
> Of combat when the irate whale
> Unlimbered all his massive powers
> Of head-ram and of caudal flail,
> Littering the water with the chips
> Of whale-boats and vainglorious ships. (p. 12)

Men are the intruders. When the whalers appear in the last part of the poem they are still the antagonists. Captain Martin Taylor and his men are not portrayed heroically. Their deaths are not heroes' deaths. Throughout the poem the whale is clothed in regal imagery. He is the king of the sea who can easily conquer any other species of the water. He meets his match in ordinary man, however. At the end of the poem the whale conquers the ship, but dies in the process. It is at the end of the poem that the only analogy with Christ can be seen. Both are triumphant victims. For the whale the scene is portrayed as one of heroic effort; man, on the other hand, draws a tie in the match without similar heroic action. Man is clearly superior in his potential to the whale. Pratt again opts for the hierarchical form of evolutionary theory.

The fullest examination of evolution which Pratt made appeared, as the companion piece to the last poem, in Titans.

"The Great Feud" is set in the ancient evolutionary past. Attempts have been made to analyse this poem in terms of the political situation in the world at the time of its composition. Although an allegorical interpretation of "The Great Feud" is more feasible than one of "The Cachalot," it is an unnecessary exercise in terms of the relevance of the former poem to an analysis of Pratt's theories of the nature of man. In this poem, it is clear that Pratt has adopted the Darwinian explanation of the evolution of the human species, and has rejected the Biblical one, at least for the expressions of this poem. A good case can be made that Pratt did completely accept Darwin's theory when some of the later poems are considered. However, it is sufficient to note at this point that Pratt was familiar with the later explanation of human origins, and used it to full advantage in "The Great Feud." At the end of the poem, when all the remaining animals and fish are killed by the lava flowing from the volcano, only the female ape survives and returns to her cave to feed her young, the ancestors of man. Significantly the ape is an anthropoid, and becomes Pratt's substitute for Eve in his explanation of the development of the human race. The motivating factor behind the war between the land and sea creatures is the evolutionary movement. The fish of the

sea

> Had felt the envasion of their cold
> Blood by an unexplained disorder. (p. 28)

Millions of their number were killed by land creatures and others were leaving the sea:

> And thousands that survived the heat
> Turned their backs upon their breed,
> Shed their fins and took on feet,
> And clambered for inland to feed. (p. 29)

Pratt then developed this factor of evolution into an imaginative feud between categories of species which turned into a massive war. The land and sea animals were forced by the situation into organization along social and political lines. Imagery of parliament and the legislative process is used to illustrate the plans made by the animals. The female ape is chosen leader since "She was the cleverest of her time," and had insight into the process of reason. Ultimately, however, the process of pseudo-political organization breaks down and internecine conflicts erupt. At the conclusion of the poem neither side is victorious, as at the end of "The Cachalot." There is an element missing in both poems which makes both sides unable to conquer the other. This element does not become clear until later in Pratt's poetic career when he reconsiders the question.

The first three volumes of Pratt's verse can be seen as introductions to the major themes which he considered in

his later verse. The poems of Newfoundland Verse raised questions which were foremost in Pratt's mind about three major factors of human existence: man's origin and evolution, man's religious concepts, and man's capacity for acts of self-sacrificial heroism. The latter two are based on observations from his childhood, of his father's ministry and the fishermen to whom he ministered. The question of evolution seemed to be an outgrowth from the other two, and attempt at understanding the nature of man and his God. The Witches' Brew and Titans explore varying aspects of these questions which concerned the poet. The former attempts to show some of the folly of which man is capable, and "The Cachalot" presents the view that under ordinary circumstances man is only equal to the highest of the animal species. "The Great Feud" resolves Pratt's exploration of the theme of evolution and is the last time that he dealt with the question of the origin of the human species. The two other questions, however, are not resolved in the early volumes of poetry which Pratt wrote. The question of religion and God's role in human life was a significant one for Pratt. His academic training was largely in theology, and it might be expected that some of his poetry would be an examination of the human concept and expression of a divine being. The other concept raised but

not resolved in the earliest poetry was the human capacity for self-sacrifice, first witnessed by the poet during his early life in Newfoundland. These two questions form the basis of much of Pratt's later poetry, and the latter is the prime force behind his writing of the major narratives.

The question of religion is a complex one both in the life and the poetry of E. J. Pratt. In fact it is even debatable whether religion is the proper word in Pratt's case. The term implies essential agreement with, or adherence to, a specific doctrinal concept of faith which is not applicable to Pratt. His faith, while not unique, is not one acceptable to the so-called organized church. In spite of this, many critics have attempted to deal with the problem of identifying Pratt's religious beliefs in the poetry, but, generally speaking, their scope has been too limited to be successful. The spectrum of opinion onPratt's religious beliefs and their effect on the poetry is wide. It ranges from John Sutherland's complex analysis of Pratt's subconscious expression of Christian faith and symbol in the poetry to Professor Buitenhuis' view of Pratt as a "reverent agnostic." Neither of these views, however, is wide enough to incorporate much of the substance of Pratt's religious or pseudo-religious poetry. Pratt's background in religion was substantial, academically and practically. There is no doubt that religion is an important factor to be considered in any explanation of the poetry. The degree to which Pratt devoted a substantial part of his life to theology is an indicator that this part of his life cannot simply be dismissed. Neither is it valid to attempt

to explain his poetry simply and exclusively in terms of religion. This chapter attempts to analyse the role of religion and theology as they appear in the poetry. It is also hoped that it will serve as an explanation of the wide divergence of opinion which has occured in critical writing regarding Pratt and religion.

The influence of the church on Pratt's life began early since his father was a Methodist minister. His early connection with the church was in terms of familiarity with the services and also his father's responsibility in the social aspects of the community. After graduation from high school, Pratt became a probationer of the Methodist Church. This position entailed lay-preaching as well as teaching in various communities along the Newfoundland coast. To this practical familiarity with the role of the pastor was later added more formal training in theology at the University of Toronto. Pratt received an undergraduate degree in psychology in 1911, a course which was appropriate for one who intended to enter the ministry. Pratt then turned to formal theological education, and received a Master's degree for a thesis on demonology in 1912. In 1913, Pratt received a bachelor's degree in divinity and was ordained into the Methodist ministry. It was at this point that it became obvious that Pratt was questioning the

advisability of his assuming the responsibilities of a parish priest. Rather than following the pattern which his education had suggested Pratt became a demonstrator in psychology. He had not yet abandoned the possibility of becoming a full-time minister. For several years he acted as assistant minister in churches in the Toronto area and worked on his doctoral dissertation. "It was a dissertation of the eschatology of St. Paul which greatly impressed his professors with its profound thoughts on death, immortality, resurrection and divine judgment."[10] It is apparent, then, that Pratt was familiar with both the practical and the academic aspects of the ministry and theology. He did not, however, enter the active ministry. Pratt remained in the psychology department for three years after receiving his doctorate, and then entered the department of English, in 1920, where he remained until his retirement.

It becomes clear, then, that practical and philosophical religion was an important part of Pratt's life. He once admitted, however, that "when it came to preaching, I was unhappy. I always hated moralizing and telling other people what to do."[11] It would be an error to assume

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10. George Lonn, "Edwin John Pratt," Canadian Profiles, (Toronto, 1965), p. 199.
11. Quoted by Helen M. McGrath, "The Bard from Newfoundland: The Story of Dr. E. J. Pratt," Atlantic Advocate, XLIX, 3, No. 3 (November, 1958), p. 15.

that this was the only reason which explains Pratt's decision not to enter the active ministry. An examination of much of Pratt's poetry tends to indicate that there was more substance behind the decision.

Since he abandoned his earlier intentions of entering the active ministry, and also dealt with the problem in his early poetry, it appears that Pratt felt an increasing doubt as to the effectiveness of the liturgical or outward manifestation of the Christian faith. In his view, the traditional concept of God was unsatisfactory when attempting to explain the terrors and destruction caused by nature. Similarly the funeral ritual was unable to ease the pain of the mourners. This was an early reflection, and deals only with the practical manifestation of religion. Later, Pratt also began to examine the philosophical assumptions of religion. The only full-length examination of theology which Pratt attempted was The Iron Door (1927), which considers the question of immortality and its relation to faith. The poet has a vision of a number of people waiting, before a vast door, for admittance into the afterlife. The poet's first thought is of doubt both regarding the motives of the individuals and the existence of an afterlife:

> And I thought what vain credulities
> Should lure those human souls before
> This vast inexorable door. (p. 11)

As the poem develops, it becomes obvious that the poet is examining a question of belief, and that he is not firm in his conviction of the reality of the soul in its theological sense. Seven figures are waiting for the door to open, and each is considered individually. A small child appears first. He is innocent and afraid, and misses the assurance which had been provided by his father. In contrast, an old master mariner stands near the child. He has devoted his life to the conquest of the sea, and has lost three of his sons in work of sea-rescue. Next appears the poet's mother who is calm and serene in her absolute faith that the door will open. The next figure is anxious to find the truth about immortality, and bitter about his death. He is a young sailor who died while attempting to save another life. An artist and a philosopher follow: the first wondering whether the Creator had expended all his effort making the glories of earth and nature, the second calmly awaiting the revelation of the truth. The last figure is an old woman whose only son had been put to death. Ultimately the great door opens, and the dead begin to walk towards it. The poet is unable to see inside, however, and only knows that the seven figures are inside before the door closes. He is aware of a glow of life within which provides a kind of confirmation. The poem cannot be seen as an expression of the poet's belief.

There is no definitive answer to the question of afterlife. The significance of the poem lies in the fact that belief can be real and useful for the individual on earth. If religion can provide the stimulus for the action of the young sailor who died attempting to save another, and if it provides peace and contentment for the poet's mother, then it is a valuable companion on life's journey. Conversely, the poet realized that faith is not the sole criterion for self-sacrificial acts, and it is not the only stimulus toward a satisfactory life on earth.

The method by which The Iron Door is developed is significant. The central fact in the poem is man, and God is never mentioned. In Pratt's view, the importance of religion is proportional to the way in which it stimulates each individual to action, or makes the trials of life easier to bear. It is an individual experience, and not necessarily dependent upon the church. Religion is valuable if it helps to ease the grief of the woman who appears in one of Pratt's most moving poems, "Erosion":

> It took the sea a thousand years,
> A thousand years to trace
> The granite features of this cliff,
> In crag and scarp and base.
>
> It took the sea an hour one night,
> An hour of storm to place
> The sculpture of these granite seams
> Upon a woman's face.
>
> (Many Moods, p. 10)

Pratt's primary concern is with the effect of religion on man. The apparent conclusion is that if man is helped by belief, then religion has proved that it is worthwhile. The outward manifestation of religion, the church and its ritual, is questionable in its effect.

In "The Toll of the Bells," Pratt indicated that the church failed in its mission to comfort the bereaved. This theme reappeared in his later verse. The Roosevelt and the Antinoe is the first of Pratt's celebrations of human potential. The religious aspect of the poem is slight, but of great importance in a consideration of Pratt's view of religion. It should now be clear that Pratt differentiated sharply between religion and the church. The characters of The Iron Door were, for the most part, religious. Any dissatisfaction with belief is illustrated in terms of the church. It is the church, in the form of a minister and a priest, which appears in The Roosevelt and the Antinoe. The poem is properly a sea narrative, and will be discussed below in terms of self-sacrificial action. The services held on the Roosevelt are relevant to a discussion of Pratt's view of religion, however.

From the very beginning of the section of the poem devoted to services, the scene is depicted in ironic terms. Despite the exciting nature of the material used in his narratives, Pratt is very sparing in his use of exclamation

marks; yet one appears in the following lines:

> At ten o'clock the Roosevelt bugle sounding
> From the saloon stairway a call to prayer! (p. 28)

The attitude of the poet seems to be that a call to worship is the last thing needed at the time of crisis which the sailors are facing. The storm is the immediate foe to be dealt with, yet time is taken for prayer. There is greater irony in the fact that

> With separated phrase and smothered word
> An immemorial psalm became a blurred
> Bulwark under erosion by the sea.
> Beneath the maddening crashes of the wind
> Crumbled the grammar of the liturgy. (p. 28)

Clearly it is the storm, and not God or men, which has the upper hand during the service. The supreme irony occurs in the Protestant service when the padre reads the lines "Who commandest the seas and they do obey thee." Pratt does not believe that statement.

Reading between the lines of this passage it appears that Pratt is also criticizing another failing of organized religion. It is unacceptable to Pratt's view of religion that it should be necessary to have two services, performed by two different clerics, commending the same souls to the same God. Yet the Roman Catholic priest appears, in full clerical regalia, to add his service to the previous one

> Feeling that from an older faith would come
> The virtue of a rubric yet unspoken
> For the transition of a soul, a crumb
> Of favour from a cupboard not bereft
> Of all by the night's intercessions.... (p. 30)

The priest's words are in Latin, and are also dispersed by the storm. At the conclusion of the prayer there is a suggestion that the priest himself senses the futility of the words of the service as he reverts to the vernacular "murmuring God rest their souls." Pratt then makes an explicit statement about his view of God's power over nature and man:

> But no Gennesaret of Galilee
> Conjured to its level by the sway
> Of a hand or a word's magic was this sea,
> Contesting with its iron-alien mood,
> Its pagan face, its own primordial way,
> The pale heroic suasion of a rood. (p. 31)

He is not denying the value of a faith in God for the individual; neither is he suggesting that there is no God. Pratt simply makes it clear that organized or liturgical religion is not a particularly satisfying or meaningful aid, particularly in times of crisis. Pratt would agree with the view that

> the Master and seamen of the Roosevelt risk death or die not for God -- nor because of the contract signed at the beginning of the voyage -- but because they can do no other. Being who and what they are, they have no choice, and it never occurs to them to ask for one.[12]

Pratt's analysis and definition of religion dealt with many aspects of theology. From the above discussion it is apparent that he tended to separate the God whom people

12. A. J. M. Smith, Some Poems of E. J. Pratt: Aspects of Imagery and Theme, (The Pratt Lecture, St. John's, 1969), p. 11.

worshipped, and from whom they drew strength, from the God who was allegedly responsible for controlling the universe. The passages in The Roosevelt and the Antinoe which present the services seem to indicate that, in Pratt's opinion, God was as helpless as men in the face of nature which is seen as pagan. This is an important distinction which is further developed in the later poetry, and which helps in explaining Pratt's complex view of religion. In his next volume of poetry, Many Moods (1932), Pratt's concept of God and religion is further expounded.

Several poems in the volume concern themselves with Pratt's theological musings from different viewpoints. The poem "Erosion" quoted above substantiates the view that Pratt did not identify God with the destructive forces of nature. One of the best-known poems in the volume is an extravaganza, "The Depression Ends." The extent to which Pratt concerned himself with the situation of the common man and his problems is obvious in the poem. After having read much of Pratt's poetry one has the impression that the poet would indeed offer such a feast as often as possible if he were able. In addition to expressing his concern with the plight of the poor, Pratt also illustrates two highly significant points about religion in the poem. The first concerns itself with the type of person he believes a minister should be in order to communicate effectively with his people. Pratt believed that life was precious and

should be enjoyed. The person to offer thanks for the great feast should be

> A padre of high blood - no white
> Self-pinched, self-punished anchorite,
> Who credits up against his dying
> His boasted hours of mortifying,
> Who thinks he hears a funeral bell
> In dinner gongs on principle.
> He shall be left to mourn this night,
> Walled in his dim religious light:
> Unto this feast he shall not come
> To breathe his gloom. (p. 17)

The proper thing for a cleric to be is happy and satisfied in his faith. The second important fact of religion indicated in the poem is a simple reference to Christ and the miracle he performed at the wedding feast at Cana:

> For not since Galilean days
> Has such a miracle been wrought. (p. 18).

This seemingly simple and logical reference to Christ becomes far more significant when it is realized that it is the first specific reference to Him in all of Pratt's poetry, except when the poet is alluding to church liturgy. Until this point Pratt had never used the name of Christ or even recalled any of His acts. It becomes clear, then, that Pratt was turning to a consideration of Christ in his own thinking. Two more poems in Many Moods contain references to Christ which will serve to substantiate this suggestion. The first, "Whither?" considers the fate of the world and answers the suggestions of an apocalypse. The first stanza quoted postulates the fate of the world, and the poet

responds with another allusion to Christ and love:

> No soul will then remain alive,
> And all things good therein --
> Faith, love, or valour will survive
> As little as its sin.
> But I know one whose heart possessed
> A love that won't expire,
> Should Fate provide no sterner test
> Than time or frost or fire. (p. 27)

The third reference to Christ in the volume appears in the poem "The Highway." The poem is an examination of the development of mankind which Pratt believes reached its apex

> When in her sacrificial way
> Judaea blossomed with her Christ! (p. 28)

To Pratt, then, the life exemplified by Christ is the ideal to which humans should aspire. The concluding lines of the same poem cast further light on Pratt's concept:

> How may we grasp again the hand that wrought
> Such light, such fragrance, and such love,
> O star, O rose, O Son of Man? (p. 28)

Christ is seen as the "Son of Man", not of God. He is established as the epitome of human potential and as the model for human aspiration. In Pratt's view, Christ's example is that of self-sacrifice, and the willingness to sublimate individual desires to the needs of others. It is this quality which is characteristic of the collective heroes of much of his poetry. Whether their ability to demonstrate this quality comes from the example of Christ or not is incidental to Pratt. What is important is that the individual exhibits this potential in times of need and crisis.

It is through this realization of human potential that Pratt was able to fix several ideals of religion. Religion became one of the models by which man was able to demonstrate this paramount quality of self-sacrifice or heroism. The poems contain "no bluster about red-blooded heroes."[13] They demonstrate the supreme potential of humanity.

At this stage in his exploration of religion, Pratt had opted not against God, but for man. In a poem which appeared in the next volume of short poems, The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems (1937), Pratt considered the achievements of man. "A Prayer-Medley" is an exaltation of man, and reviews his accomplishments. The poem is addressed to the "Lord," and takes a form similar to that of the litany, a traditional church order of service. Man is praised for having triumphed over his earth, air, and water; and also for succeeding in defining the limits of the universe. In the second part of the poem, however, Pratt credits God with many of the apparent achievements in the realm of improving the total human lot. This is not simply an act of worship. Pratt states that God is responsible for improving the human condition:

> For thou didst soften the hearts of thy legislators
> when they
> decreed that no child under ten should work
> more
> than twelve hours a day in the damp and the
> dark. (p.28)

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13. Northrop Frye, "Editor's Introduction," The Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1958), p. xv.

This is clearly intentional irony. Pratt exhibits doubt that any God could justify this obvious human misery. Neither the Old Testament God of Justice nor the New Testament God of Love could be responsible for human suffering. The rejection of any superior being which permits misery is clear. Toward the end of the poem Pratt states: "But now having become men, we put away childish things" (p.30). This reference to Him reaffirms Pratt's view that Christ should be the inspiration for man rather than an unjust God. For Pratt, man and the example of Christ were emerging as the combination which satisfied his doubts about religion. The role of God was, as yet, undefined.

In his thinking, Pratt had now reached the conclusion that Christ was human and that man was capable of great achievements. Since Christ was seen as demonstrating ultimate human potential, Pratt was obliged to review, or even indeed establish, his concept of God. Many factors of his life made this decision particularly difficult. Perhaps paramount was the question of amoral or pagan nature which was so indiscriminate in its destructiveness. The traditional New Testament concept of a God of Love was irreconcilable with the fact of death which was so pervasive in the lives of those who lived by the sea. In <u>The Iron Door</u> and elsewhere, Pratt had decided that faith in God was valuable only

insofar as it either made life easier for the suffering, or prompted men to accomplish self-sacrificial acts. All these factors combined made the task of defining God a difficult one. As a result, it was several years before the culmination of this process of definition appeared. The answer was a poem which appeared in the volume Still Life and Other Verse (1943).

"The Truant" is a quasi-allegorical presentation of a confrontation between man and the power of the universe which Pratt called "the great Panjandrum." The term literally has meant a pompous pretender to power, and it is the theme of power which Pratt explores. The aides around the throne of the "All High" treat him with great deference and respect. The Master of the Revels refers to him as

> Right Reverend, most adored,
> And forcibly acknowledged Lord. (p. 4)

The truant refuses to acknowledge this power, and challenges the Panjandrum. Throughout the poem the speech of the servants is contrasted with the disrespectful tone of the human. Significantly the Panjandrum is addressed in terms familiar to Pratt from ecclesiastical liturgy. The chemist's report refers to Lord as worthy of "dominion and power and glory" (p. 5). These words are taken directly from prayers of the church. The human figure is to be

punished because he believes in free will, and because he challenges the power of the Panjandrum to kill indiscriminately. After tracing man's evolutionary origins, the Panjandrum declares that the truant is to be punished because of his deviance, his unwillingness to conform. It is just this unwillingness to consider other points of view which Pratt is questioning. The poem is "an indictment of absolute power without recognition of moral ends."[14]

It is in the human reply to the Panjandrum's accusations that Pratt's concept of man in relation to God becomes clear. In a long speech "genus homo" defies the Panjandrum and points out that man was largely responsible for creating his God. Man realizes that the figure whose charges he is answering is only a mechanistic power. The Panjandrum is the destructive force in nature, and "the capacity in man that enables him to be deliberately cruel."[15] Man acknowledges the power which the mechanistic God has, but does not bow before it:

> 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. (p.9)

Man's defiant speech ends with the dramatic statement: "No! by the Rood, we will not join your ballet" (p. 10).

14. Desmond Pacey, Ten Canadian Poets,(Toronto, 1958), p. 168.
15. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," Literary History of Canada, ed. C.F. Klinck,(Toronto, 1965), p. 846.

With this statement Pratt's analysis of religion is complete. The truant gained the strength to confront and defy the purely mechanistic God from the example and inspiration of Christ's life and crucifixion. From earlier poetry it became clear that Pratt believed that Christ had been human, and as such he became the supreme example of that quality to which all men should aspire. By explaining God in terms of the great Panjandrum Pratt was able to rationalize the forces of destruction present in the world. In the poem "The Truant," Pratt "castigates orthodox opinion, and makes man the measure of all things."[16] Through his exploration of his religious beliefs, Pratt was able to identify those factors which tend to separate men from the lower species on the evolutionary scale. Those factors are "the qualities in man that Pratt most admires: his power to endure violence, to respond to appeals from his fellows for help, and to follow the way of love in the very teeth of hatred."[17]

The change, or more accurately the development, of Pratt's view of religion can be explained in terms of a shift in emphasis which occured over a period of several

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16. Harold Horwood, "E. J. Pratt and William Blake: An Analysis," Dalhousie Review, xxxiv, No. 2 (Summer, 1959), p. 199.
17. Pacey, p. 169.

years, and through several volumes of poetry. In the early poetry and The Iron Door particularly, Pratt considered man in relation to God. God was the starting point and the position of man was determined with reference to God and religion. The final expression of the shift in emphasis appeared in "The Truant." In that poem God is seen in relation to man, and it is man who has become the point of reference. The point of view has changed, and Pratt has now become ultimately concerned with man first. "Pratt believes, quite simply, that not only all gods, but all godliness, dwell in the human breast. All things begin and end in man."[18] Pratt has become an intense humanist, and man in his criterion of all judgment. Humanism has become Pratt's personal religion.

The question of Pratt's religious beliefs has evoked much critical comment. As has been mentioned above, John Sutherland is the only critic who maintains that Pratt is a strongly Christian poet. As a reaction against Sutherland's approach Vincent Sherman wrote an article expressing an opposite viewpoint: "A Christian interpretation of Pratt's work is, I believe, erroneous; but even if such interpretation could be reasonably upheld it would be too limiting to the intent of his poetry...."[19] The above chapter has,

18. Horwood, p. 203.
19. Vincent Sharman, "Illusion and an Atonement: E. J. Pratt and Christianity," Canadian Literature, xix (Winter, 1964), p. 21.

I believe, satisfactorily explained Pratt's personal concept of God and religion, but has not answered the question of what role religion plays in the poetry. Sharman went on to conclude that

> For Pratt, what men must understand is that their salvation lies in themselves, not Nature, God, systems, or in ignorant pride in machines. To maintain life should be the end of men's actions, the accomplishment of which, in times of conflict, is dependent on defiance, determination, and Reason under the control of the heart (pp. 31-32).

This view is not entirely accurate. Pratt's ultimate desire was that men should be able to accomplish self-sacrificial acts following Christ's example. Pratt maintained that religion and faith could provide the stimulus for men to act heroically. His view was that religion could prompt men to sublimate self-interest to the general good. In that sense faith became an acceptable and desirable thing if it motivated men toward reaching their human potential exemplified by the life and death of Christ.

In sum, then, Pratt's analysis of faith and religion was a long and complex process. For him personally, God was a mechanistic deity who held an arbitrary power over human life and death. Christ was a human, the son of man, who had demonstrated ultimate human potential. On the other hand, faith in a benevolent God was seen as a desirable thing since it was capable of spurring men to accomplish heroic deeds. The ultimate proof of this view lies in the fact

that the hero of one of Pratt's most magnificent narratives, Brébeuf, was motivated by his faith. Pratt's "best praise is reserved for man - man beset, exhausted, killed, but ultimately victorious."[20] He also recognized that, for some men, the victory was won through the inspiration provided by faith.

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20. Buitenhuis, p. xvii.

In Pratt criticism, the most frequent conclusion reached regarding the human figures who display unusual courage is that they are heroes. This sweeping categorization is severely limited in its usefulness since it assumes that courageous actions simply occur under certain circumstances. For Pratt, however, self-sacrificial actions were always based on some singularly human qualities. The problem is also one of definition. In the precise sense of heroism used with relation to the epic poets, Pratt was not an heroic poet. The only poem which has clear affinities with the epic tradition is "The Cachalot" which contains several mock-heroic conventions. The most significant objection to this critical stance toward Pratt came in an essay by John Sutherland. He claimed that his essay sprang "from a belief that the prevailing view - the view that Pratt is an 'heroic poet' - is seriously limited and ultimately misleading."[21] While Sutherland was properly objecting to a rather serious critical omission, his solution or proposal is no more convincing than the one which inspired it. A purely Christian interpretation of the human acts of courage in the poems is also limited and misleading. Nonetheless, Pratt recognized a quality in man which enabled him to aspire to great heights of courage and sacrifice. From the early

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21. John Sutherland, "E. J. Pratt: A Major Contemporary Poet." Northern Review, V, Nos. 3 & 4 (February-March and April-May, 1952), p. 36

days in Newfoundland, Pratt was conscious of the vast human potential which was called upon in moments of crisis. For Pratt, man became "the unique creature, the rebel, the thing of illimitable capacity for creation or destruction, the one unpredictable being in a mechanical cosmos, the truant of the universe."[22]

The question of human capacity for courage and determination became paramount for Pratt. Whether bravery were displayed by Newfoundland fishermen or by Canadian soldiers overseas, Pratt was fascinated by it. In the preceding chapter it became clear that man was of great importance and interest to Pratt, and that he was capable of performing great deeds. In his narrative poems in particular Pratt turned his energies to exploring human potential, and man's capacity to exercise sound judgment in times of crisis. He was not only concerned with the acts themselves, but with the motives and stimuli behind them. The method by which Pratt established situations in which man could demonstrate his potential is a mark of the twentieth century, and was most clearly stated by the poet himself:

> It took a long time to allow machinery to find a legitimate place as poetic material. But if the reaping-hook, the loom, and the plow entered, why should not the motor, the steam-shovel, and the caterpillar tank? And the idiom of the factory is as much a part of English speech as the

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22. Earle Birney, "E. J. Pratt and his Critics," Masks of Poetry, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto, 1962), p. 88.

conversation of the "salon." Whether or not it can be translated into poetry depends upon the power in the hands of the craftsman. [23]

Pratt's concern with evolution led him to make interesting conclusions about the distinctions between man and the animals, particularly in terms of their respective capacities for self-sacrificial deeds. The literal hero of the poem "Carlo" in Newfoundland Verse saved scores of people on a sinking ship by swimming to shore with a rope. In a somewhat similar poem in Many Moods, Pratt explored the acts of another dog. "A Reverie on a Dog" tells of a family pet who twice saved a group of children from injury. Once he warned them of the presence of a shark while they were swimming, and later he held off a charging bull while they ran from the field. Pratt's conclusion regarding the innate factors which spurred the dog to action is highly revelatory:

> And many another deed
> There was of this like scale which would have won
> A barrow full of stars, had it been done
> By men, but being natural to your breed,
> The acts have slipped your knowledge and concern.
> (p. 8).

Through the evolutionary process man has lost the ability to perform similar deeds automatically. For this reason deeds of self-sacrifice are far more significant when they

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23. "Introduction," Heroic Tales in Verse, (Toronto, 1941), pp. ix-x.

are performed by men. "The dog illustrated the view of heroism which pervades all Pratt's poems: heroic action derives not only from knowing what must be done, but, even more important, from knowing how it can be done."[24] This quality is more rarely evoked in man than in animals; for that reason it is to be highly prized, and Pratt was to pay homage to it.

Since Pratt had first become aware of the human capability for self-sacrifice among the sailors of Newfoundland, the earliest celebration of that quality took the form of narrative poems about seamen and the seas. The first major length exploration of the theme appeared in 1930 in The Roosevelt and the Antinoe.[25] This poem, as are all the major narratives, is based on an actual event during which the ultimate capacity of man for action which required sublimation of the self is demonstrated. In January of 1926, during a long and severe storm at sea, the events which were captured in Pratt's poems actually occurred. The action of the poem begins in New York harbour as the crew is signed on for the trans-Atlantic voyage of the passenger ship Roosevelt, and ends with the same ship leaving Plymouth after delivering the rescued crew of the Antinoe. Between falls some of the

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24. Munro Beattie, "E. J. Pratt," Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl Klinck et.al. (Toronto, 1965), p. 743.

25. The MacMillan Company, New York and Toronto, 1930.

most exhilarating poetry in Pratt's work, and some of man's most courageous achievements.

With a characteristic touch of irony, Pratt begins the poem with the pledge the crew must take in order to be accepted for the voyage. The men are called upon to be

> faithful, true,
> And orderly, in honest, sober manner;
> At all times in their duty diligent;
> To the Master's lawful word obedient,
> In everything relating to the vessel -
> Safety of passengers, cargo and store,
> Whether on board, in boats, or on the shore.
> (pp. 9-10)

The only foreboding note is the requirement that each sailor identify his next-of-kin, but this is simply a normal requirement. With crew and passengers aboard, the Roosevelt leaves the harbour. Without further description of ship or passengers, Pratt enters immediately into the action:

> Thursday morning rose without a sun,
> Sleet in the air: the wind was westerly:
> The River breeze of Wednesday had begun
> To stiffen to a whole gale on the sea. (p. 11)

Small ships are recalled to port, or not permitted to leave, but the Roosevelt is a large vessel and is permitted to continue her voyage. On shore the radio waves are kept clear so that any distress signals can be answered promptly. The invention of wireless was an important one for men of the sea, and Pratt had shared in its development as a child. Recalling the school trip to Marconi's laboratories and the

subsequent announcement of the invention of the telegraph, Pratt states:

> Those of us who remember the announcement may recall the sense of conquest over Nature that visited the hearts of men, the trust in science for the prevention of the grosser human calamities. Wireless had not only given a richer meaning to the phrase "the brotherhood of the sea", but it was considered as having eliminated for ever the horror of the huge tolls after collisions and storms.[26]

Wireless, of course, was largely responsible for the drama of The Roosevelt and the Antinoe which was to unfold. Soon the radio cabin of the former ship received the emergency S.O.S. signal, and the rescue attempt began.

According to the unwritten code of the sea, Captain Fried accepted his responsibility unquestioningly, and began the search for the Antinoe. Time is very clearly defined in the poem, and Pratt is careful to point out the passing of the hours. After over seven hours of searching, the Antinoe is sighted. None of the crew of the Roosevelt states it, but every member is aware of the dangerous mission which will ensue. Pratt also is aware of the subconscious fears of the men, and acknowledges it:

> All felt within their blood they could depend
> On nothing but an elementary trust
> In bulkheads; in the physics of a dark
> Equation, where with each remorseless thrust
> Down to the starboard limits of the arc,
> The ship should take under unheard commands

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26. "Memories of Newfoundland," p. 56.

> The port recoil, a pivoted keel, and then,
> At the crux of the port roll find again
> The firm up-heave of Atlantean hands.
> On such a faith, borne in by night and snow,
> Rested the riddle of the Antinoe. (p. 11)

This is the faith of the sea. These are the assumptions on which the sailors are able to base their actions, and the precepts which give rise to their heroic actions. All men are joined together in a bond against the ravages of the sea in bad weather.

The Antinoe disappears in a squall, and is finally resighted. Captain Fried of the Roosevelt makes his decision, and calls for volunteers to man the boat which will attempt to reach the floundering vessel. The men appear, "answering the summons with a will," since

> in such a sea
> And cause the order needed no command,
> Only the heart's assent unto the hand.
> (p. 25)

Pratt describes the attempt of the small boat to breach the short but dangerous gulf with vivid accuracy. Twice the lifeboat capsizes. The first time all the men are able to re-enter, and with incredible determination they struggle on toward the Antinoe. The second time, however, two of the brave volunteers are lost. The manner in which the second sailor is lost is at the heart of all Pratt's narratives. One of the men drowns in the act of saving another, as did the young seaman celebrated in The Iron Door.

Man's potential for acts of self-sacrifice is again displayed:

> Wertanen, who twice
> And willingly released his own firm grip
> To take within his teeth a rope eye-splice,
> Swam fifteen yards to leeward of the ship
> To help an exhausted mate, and paid his price
> In drifting past the adventure of return. (p. 27)

This is the facet of human existence which was, for Pratt, the ultimate achievement. In this sense only each man is a Christ-figure, in that he is capable, in times of crisis, of laying down his life for another. This is the heroism which is at the center of much of Pratt's poetry. The glory is in the act itself, not in the rewards which may follow it.

Following the unsuccessful rescue attempt and the return of the first boat is the memorial service discussed above. The most significant part of the section lies not in the service itself, but in the thoughts of the men attending it. Undaunted and undefeated by the unsuccessful attempt at rescue and by the loss of two men,

> Miller and his men were ranged around
> Bandaged in head and wrists, with arms in sling,
> And others who had come, despite the warning,
> To take their places were envisaging
> The job that lay before them in the morning. (p. 29)

There is no need to question or examine motives. Every time that volunteers were requested, more men presented themselves than were required. Under the circumstances it was the

natural response of every man aboard to volunteer. Crisis and necessity were the stimuli required to evoke the ultimate human capability for heroic, self-sacrificial action. In the following passage Pratt uses imagery of a game of chance to demonstrate the extent to which the odds were against the rescuers in the face of the storm:

> With every tap of key, the Roosevelt knew
> How little would the game depend on skill
> Of hand, or resolution of the will,
> How much would all the morrow's gain and loss
> Turn on the unknown chances of a toss. (p. 32)

In the face of these odds, however, men were willing to make the attempt to rescue other humans in danger. There is no question of depending on the agent of a benevolent God to relieve the intensity of the storm. Pratt believes that man alone is responsible for shaping his destiny, and the time to demonstrate his potential is when others are in need of help. The action itself is also the reward. Traditionally, heroic action is rewarded by glory or riches or fame. The only reward received by the heroes which Pratt celebrates is in the act itself, and perhaps the fact that it stimulates others to similar achievements.

After nearly four days have been spent in the rescue attempt, the decision is made to send out another manned rescue boat. The second effort gives Pratt another opportunity to try to analyse the singular quality which enables

men to perform deeds of self-sacrifice. Re-establishing the image of gambling, Pratt concludes that

> The hour had called for argument more rife
> With the gambler's sacrificial bid for life,
> The final matter native to the breed,
> Of men forging decision into deed --
> Of getting down again into the sea,
> And testing rowlocks in an open boat,
> Of grapping with the storm-king bodily,
> And placing Northern fingers on his throat. (p.37)

It is highly significant that the decision to attempt the rescue again is based on a "native" quality. Pratt believed that any man was inherently capable of performing similar deeds, providing that the suitable stimulus was present. Twelve of the twenty-five crewmen of the Antinoe are rescued during the second attempt, but the other thirteen necessitated calling for more volunteers. Despite the fact that several days had already been spent in the rescue, the response to the summons for volunteers was larger than ever, and came from all sections of society:

> Millar commanding for the third time drew
> From the line-up of forty volunteers
> Of every rank, - deck-hand to passenger. (p.40)

On the third attempt the remaining thirteen men are rescued. Pratt does not dwell on the events which occured after all were saved; neither is he concerned with the potential symbolism present in the situation of thirteen men being rescued on the third attempt. His major task, that of demonstrating the extent to which man will suffer to save

other men, is complete. The question of heroism is not finished. It is pointed out that Captain Tose of the Antinoe had previously accomplished a similar rescue in a storm only slightly less severe. There is, then, no single hero. All the men who volunteered for the direct attempts at rescue are named, but none dominates. Robert Millar, the first officer and commander of the rescue, served on all three attempts, yet he is not singled out for his bravery. Captain Fried of the Roosevelt was obliged to use all his skill of navigation and judgment, yet he does not dominate the action. Although each man is identified individually, it is a collective heroism which characterizes the rescue of the crew of the Antinoe. Pratt is praising mankind, not men. Ultimately, "the victory is with the rescuing crew, significantly respresentative of many nationalities, who perform deeds of self-sacrificing heroism as if these are all in the day's work."[27] The men are revived, and the normal routine of the ship is restored. The only display of joy comes from the ship's horns:

> The siren! Never did a whistle blow
> Upon a ship at sea like this before.
> The notes came from a silver throat aglow
> With life and triumph. (p. 43)

The siren is celebrating a victory over death and the elements; it is not praising the actions of any one hero.

27. Carlyle King, "The Mind of E.J. Pratt", Canadian Forum, XXXVI, No. 423 (April, 1958), p. 10.

When the ship arrives in port the impression is created that the crew and the ship itself is embarrassed by the praise offered them. They feel that under the circumstances they could have taken no other action, and the celebration is quickly ended. The poem concludes with characteristic understatement:

> The nation gave its thanks on board; and she,
> Soon ready for completion of her run,
> Swung out the Sound, with her day's work well done,
> And in an hour was on the Channel sea. (p. 44)

No thanks are offered in Pratt's next major narrative of the sea, neither should they be. There is no cause for joy or the celebration of heroism in The Titanic.[28] The poem is, nonetheless, a further examination of man in times of crisis, with the difference that much of the difficulty in the poem is brought about by man himself. Just as much of Pratt's poetry is concerned with the heights of human achievement, some also deals with less successful efforts. In The Roosevelt and the Antinoe there is one clearly defined adversary: the storm on the Atlantic. There is also a clear line drawn between the attacker and the beseiged. In The Titanic, however, it is less obviously a case of protagonist and antagonist battling for supremacy. In fact it is difficult, if not impossible, to assign dramatic roles to any person or object in the poem since there is virtually no drama present. The question of a hero in the poem thus

28. The Macmillan Company, Toronto, 1935.

becomes virtually meaningless.

Ironically, both the major figures of the poem are introduced in terms resembling those used to present heroes in epic poetry. The "births" of both the Titanic and the iceberg are traced early in the poem. Again ironically, the ship is "baptized" in the opening lines, although this Christian ritual was not to prove helpful in determining the fate of the Titanic. Pratt was constantly aware of the role which man had to play in relation to the machine. Man had to be in command, and a slight human error could prove disastrous. It was, then, with clearly subjective and disapproving eyes that Pratt viewed the confidence that was placed in the Titanic by its designers, builders, and the public. Pratt could not acknowledge the existence of an "ocean lifeboat" and was displaying obvious skepticism in the lines

> No waves could sweep those upperdecks-unthinkable!
> No storm could hurt that hull-the papers said so.
> The perfect ship at last-the first unsinkable
> Proved in advance-had not the folders read so? (p.4)

Clearly the poet was in an advantageous position in that he had the assistance of retrospect; yet Pratt would not have been able to condone such unthinking confidence under any circumstances. The seas are strong adversaries, and no assumptions can legitimately be made when so many variables may be faced. The ultimate condemnation of presumption could be prompted by the attitude behind the comment

> What mattered that her boats were but a third
> Of full provision - caution was absurd:
> Then let the ocean roll and the winds blow
> While the risk at Lloyds remained a record low. (p.4)

It is clear, then, that Pratt did not consider the ship to be an unfortunate victim of fate. The element of fate is introduced into the poem in various ways, however, and ill omens abound. Strange waves and accidents occurred the day of the maiden voyage which concerned old sailors; the high speeds achieved by the vessel recalled other similar incidents during which ships had been lost; and the presence of an allegedly cursed mummy in the hold all combined to create an aura of mystery and concern about the fate of the ship. All these omens, however, are not as convincing explanations for the tragedy which was to occur, as is the unreserved and unquestioning confidence placed by man in the machine. No bad omens could be as effective in predicting and determining disaster as could the lack of concern demonstrated in the following passage:

> Even the judgment stood in little need
> Of reason, for the watch had but to read
> Levels and lights, meter or card or bell
> To find the pressures, temperatures, or tell
> Magnetic North within a binnacle. (p. 11)

<u>The Titanic</u> is, at least in part, a study in human folly. The true antagonist is not the iceberg, but human fallibility and error.

Through the course of the narrative human folly is

collective, and ultimately reaches such a point as to be disastrous. Even if The Titanic were not the poetic representation of an actual event, the conclusion would most likely be the same. The basic assumptions made about the absolute safety of the ship itself should be unacceptable to anyone familiar with the sea and ships. The sea can be such an unpredictable, violent, and disastrous enemy that reason must always dominate emotion so as to lessen the chances of disaster. In Pratt's view, lack of reason was the prime cause of the disaster. It is not solely assumption which caused the sinking, however, but rather the attitude which the absolute confidence in the ship created. In response to a warning about a large field of ice in the area, the confident captain of the Titanic merely replies

> Say, Californian, shut up, keep out,
> You're jamming all my signals with Cape Race.
> (p. 19)

Marconi's invention cannot prevent disaster simply by its existence; it must be properly used and communication heeded. Regardless of whether the wireless is supported by "Three sources of power," if the messages it was designed to transmit are unheeded, its presence is useless.

Throughout the hours preceding the sinking, Pratt indirectly indicates the sense of security present on board the vessel. All the passengers are engaged in social activities and are enveloped in a cloak of false security.

In the gymnasium there is a wrestling match, and in the lounge a masquerade ball. Using a "montage" technique Pratt observes several conversations on board. Three men are discussing the vessel, and one appears concerned that warnings are being received about the ice,and about the excessive speed. He is lulled into security by his companions who show fullest confidence in the captain (pp.13-15). Various conversations which indicate complete confidence in the ship and her crew are related. Typical of these conversations is the trust which both passengers and crew have in machinery. As one passenger maintained:

> For all the hand work there's to do
> Aboard this liner upon deck, the crew
> Might just as well have stopped ashore. (p. 17)

The sense of security is heightened by the fact that all the conversations are interrupted by waiters and diners calling out for exotic foods and wines. The evening before the collision was one characterized by security and pleasure. Several men engage in a poker game, and most of the passengers are asleep. Even the captain's judgment has been dulled into passivity, and, despite the warnings of ice, the ship is travelling at an excessive speed with all the bulkheads open.

Pratt was aware of the irony involved in the actual sinking of the Titanic, and made use of it in the poem. The

ship was struck only a glancing blow by the iceberg, but it was in an area of sufficient importance to cause great damage. A fine line existed between the grandiose claims made for the ship, and its potential. Had the intricate electrical machinery worked properly, and the bulkhead doors closed, the ship would probably have stayed afloat and justified the confidence put in her. The important fact for Pratt was that man had made himself vulnerable to the elements because machinery had made him over-confident. Over-confidence and lack of vigilance had caused the initial contact with the iceberg and was also to heighten the death-toll. As the passage quoted above indicates the lifeboats were unable to carry more than one-third of the people on board even if they were filled to capacity. As Pratt notes, because of the general panic the crew was unable to lower even this percentage of the people to safety. The events leading up to the disaster, and the ensuing panic, were the products of human folly. The false security was so strong that even after the collision the orchestra was ordered to keep playing, and even the captain could not believe that his ship was doomed.

In terms of the question of heroics in Pratt's poetry The Titanic is not revealing. In terms of the poet's view of man, however, it is highly revealing. The only potential hero in the traditional sense was the captain of the Carpathia.

He embarked on a rescue attempt, as did the captain of the Roosevelt, based on, in Pratt's words, a

> Decision of a captain to redeem
> Errors of brain by hazards of the heart! (p. 33)

He was too late, however, and the dominant impression left by the poem is that "errors of brain" were responsible for an unnecessary disaster. The ability to perform deeds of self-sacrifice is not only dependent upon necessity, but also upon a certain mental awareness or condition which enables the individual to act unselfishly. The panic on the Titanic was prompted by an invalid confidence which effectively eliminated any potential for heroism. In an unusual critical stance, Desmond Pacey explains that his preference for The Titanic over The Roosevelt and the Antinoe is partly based on the fact that "...the human beings are themselves torn between the temptation to revert to primitive barbarism and the aspiration towards courage, compassion, and courtesy."[29] This is essentially a misrepresentation of Pratt's concept of evolution. The reason that the Titanic disaster was worsened by panic is not that man was regressing on the evolutionary scale, but rather that he had advanced so far in the development of his technical skills that confidence in machines had replaced reason and sound judgment. Pratt

29. Ten Canadian Poets, (Toronto, 1958), p. 182.

was advocating the retention of human judgment, not predicting an impending return to barbarism.

The Titanic is not as involving or exciting a poem as The Roosevelt and the Antinoe. It has been well stated that "Where there is no conflict, there is no drama. This poem does not move us as The Roosevelt and the Antinoe moved us."[30] The Titanic is, nonetheless an important poem for an analysis of Pratt's concept of man. Twentieth-century man was the topic of both of Pratt's major sea narratives. In fact the two poems could not have been written in any other age. Pratt was fully aware of the rapid rate of technological development characteristic of this century, and in its best aspects he praised it. He was also aware of the threat that the new technology could pose for man. Man was at the center of Pratt's universe, and he praised the best qualities of humanity. The situation presented in The Roosevelt and the Antinoe was based on the human qualities of courage, determination, and reason; that of The Titanic was prompted by the lack of these attributes. The actions of the men of the former poem were those which Pratt held paramount in any age; those of the latter he deplored in the technological era.

30. W. E. Collin, "Pleiocene Heroics," The White Savannahs, (Toronto, 1936), p. 135.

The Second World War provided Pratt with many further opportunities to examine human capabilities. There were three major poems published during and immediately after the war. The first, Dunkirk, appeared in 1941.[31] Pratt's interest in war was stimulated by the effect that he witnessed that war had on the human spirit. His major concern is not with the professional soldier, but with the role that was played by the civilian population. Civilian heroics reached their apex in the evacuation of Dunkirk.

The theme of evolution is strongly present in the poem. Pratt traced the ancestry of the English, and concludes that they have always struggled against oppression from the time of the Roman conquests to the end of the First World War. The conflict in which they are currently engaged is another step in their evolutionary development, not in Darwinian terms, but toward the ultimate achievement. "He sees Dunkirk as a people's long struggle for freedom."[32] More than that, however, Pratt feels that the development of the English people has led them toward exhibiting their ultimate capability:

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31. The Macmillan Company, Toronto, 1941. References to Dunkirk are taken from Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1958), pp. 300-09.

32. Coleman Rosenberger, "Two War Poems," Poetry (Chicago), LX, No. 3 (June, 1942), p. 154.

> Children of oaths and madrigals,
> They had shambled out of caves
> To write the clauses of the Charters,
> To paint the Channel mists,
> To stand hushed before the Canterbury tapers.
> (p. 302)

As is clear from the last line of this quotation, religion was part of the motivation toward action by the English. A dean and a bishop are seen joining the fleet of rescue boats, and the concluding sentiment of the poem is in the form of the phrase from church liturgy, "The peace that passed understanding." (p. 309) The dual factors of history and religion are seen by the poet as the inherent stimuli which explain the capabilities demonstrated by the English. Although many of the amateur pilots involved in the rescue are characterized individually, the overall impression is that the heroism demonstrated is collective, and the product of an age-old heritage of struggle.

The English heritage of seamanship is, for Pratt, a paramount factor in the success of the mission of rescue. "The sea was their school; the storm, their friend." (p.301). Despite this familiarity with the sea, most of the rescuers were not professional sailors, and it was their courage and determination which made the attempt successful. Pratt's concern and interest was in the act of sacrifice and its motives. The demonstration of the singularly human potential for self-sacrifice is the basis of the poem, and character-

istically,

> There are no cheap patriotics, no fuzzy political moralizing; instead, there is a re-creation of the peculiarly "British" mixture of bravery and almost ridiculous matter-of-factness, of instinctive sea-skill and amateurishness, which made possible that strangest and grimmest of all boat-races. [33]

The imagery of games and races pervades Pratt's next poem, "They Are Returning, which, as the title suggests, was written just after the end of the war. [34] The young men, who before the war were concerned with sports, have been engaged in a different competition:

> The game was on another field
> With sacrificial gain and yield. (p. 8)

Again the element of sacrifice is present as the measure of human worth. Specific incidents of heroism are not considered, but rather Pratt sees all who were engaged in the conflict as heroes. They manifest the collective sacrificial effort prompted by the upholding of principles. The sacrifice of entering war is seen as similar in kind to that of the sailors of the Roosevelt, but of a more intense degree. After illustrating many of the atrocities of war, Pratt concludes with a simple statement of the courage required to face such overwhelming horrors:

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33. Earle Birney, "A Distinguished Canadian Poem," Canadian Forum, XXI (December, 1941), pp. 278-79.
34. The Macmillan Company, Toronto, 1945.

> Between us and all that they placed their whole
> Economy of body and of soul. (p.6)

The antagonists in the war are not seen as human by the poet. The views expressed in the poem apply equally to the men on either side of the conflict. Men in the poem are facing the threat presented by war machines. Pratt's condemnation is not of the enemy, but of the element in man which enables him to create machines "With power to fight unbleeding, yet to kill" (p.5). In contrast to these manifestations of hatred Pratt juxtaposes the love of Christ. War is seen as a denial of the human potential epitomized by Christ's self-sacrifice:

> We have known blood to run
> Like this before-blood of father, blood of son,
> And we had read
> That out of blood from hands and feet and side
> A faith once came to birth
> And found its test of worth,
> Or were we so misled
> And so unprofited,
> That in the self-same stream the faith has died,
> Lost in the periodic ebb and flow
> That left an aftermath upon the earth
> Of terror, greed and woe? (p.7)

Heroism, then, is seen as a relative quality in war. There is no doubt that Pratt commends acts of self-sacrifice, but in an improper context such as war, the focus of attention alters. The actions of soldiers are seen to be less moving than those of civilians. The example of Christ, if followed would eliminate war rather than inspiring those

engaged in it.

As a result of Pratt's conscious feeling that civilian heroics in time of war are close to the Christian example, the longest poem resulting from World War II is a celebration of men engaged in the war effort apart from the actual fighting. Behind the Log[35] is the story of the trials of the supply convoys. Although Pratt refers to the obvious benefits of technological development such as radar, his best praise is reserved for the men actually involved in the convoy. There is no questioning of the motives or necessity of the voyage. The war effort in Europe is entirely dependent upon the success of the convoys, and each man involved is aware of this fact. The poem centers around the convoy and its passage, and the larger questions surrounding it are not dealt with as they were in They Are Returning. From the beginning, it is clear that Pratt's major concern is with the human agents directly involved in the convoy.

The convoy conference held at the beginning of the poem closely parallels the opening scene of The Roosevelt and the Antinoe when the sailors are instructed as to their responsibilities. The implications in Behind the Log are

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35. The Macmillan Company, Toronto, 1947.

much more severe, however. There is no irony in the lines, and attack is inevitable. At the same conference it is clear that no individual will predominate in an heroic role. The commanding officer states:

> While it is true that for the navigation
> Of his own ship each master must be held
> Responsible, there is but little room
> For rugged individualists. (p. 10)

In the same passages terms such as "team-play," "all-together," and "harmony" appear, and they all combine to create the impression of unity and joint effort. The over-riding impression is that the pack must operate as a family. Many nationalities are represented among the ship captains, and Pratt clearly demonstrates that everyone is operating under an unwritten code or tradition of the sea. The necessity of the war has placed men of all classes and types together in a single effort. Former students of Latin join with veteran sailors to support the troops in battle.

The human effort expended in Behind the Log is ultimately successful for the same reasons that the rescue succeeds in The Roosevelt and the Antinoe. Men joined together in a common bond of crisis can accomplish heroic deeds. Their heroism is collective, and based on a mutual trust in human capabilities. This is heroism characteristic of the twentieth-century, a machine age. Through joint effort

man can still accomplish miraculous deeds in the face of mammoth obstacles. In his narratives of the sea and war, Pratt illustrates his concept of human potential. Religion, the code of the sea, or a belief in a principle can all be sufficient stimuli to prompt man to react heroically. Self-sacrifice is a quality which men can invoke when the situation necessitates it. It is a quality, best demonstrated by Christ, which Pratt holds to be the ultimate criterion for assessing human worth.

Pratt's narrative poems are his greatest achievement. While many of his shorter poems are remarkable in their style and sentiment, it is in the longer works that he had sufficient scope to demonstrate his greatest capabilities. Although most of the narratives have many common ideas, such as man's potential in times of peril, there are also important differences. The Roosevelt and the Antinoe presents men in battle against the forces of an amoral nature. In the poem the adversary is distinct and apart from man. In The Titanic Pratt presents man in a type of schizophrenic state where he is defeated because he is battling between the best and the worst in himself. Pride and presumption cause his downfall. In the later war poems Pratt analyses situations in which men and machines confront other men and machines. The adversaries are not clearly described, since it is bravery and heroism on one side which Pratt wishes to study. The development through the poems can be seen as moving from considerations of men unified against a common foe to situations in which men are divided against each other. The poem which is Pratt's greatest depiction of human struggle, Brébeuf and His Brethren, also presents a situation in which men confront other men. There are, however, important differences in the motives of each contending camp which did not obtain in the other narratives.

Pratt's three most important themes, evolution, human

heroism, and religious faith all have significant roles in Brébeuf and His Brethren.[36] To some extent the struggle of the Jesuits against the unfriendly Indians, and their mission to the receptive ones, can be seen as a psychological battle between civilized and primitive man, and, in that sense, evolutionary. Self-sacrifice prompted by belief in Christ's example is the real basis for Pratt's interest in the story of the Jesuit martyrs. He presents the archetypal example of man responding heroically in dangerous situations, and the response is based on faith. For Pratt, the example of a human Christ was the supreme illustration of human capacity and potential. Brébeuf and his fellow priests exemplify this ultimate quality more thoroughly than any other of Pratt's human figures.

From the outset, Pratt's poem is set in the epic mold, as were many of his earlier poems. It becomes evident that the hero of the poem is the Company of Jesus, the Jesuit order. The genealogy of that order is traced from St. Francis of Assisi to Loyola, its founder. Similarly, Brébeuf's family lineage is given, and he is set in the epic tradition by valourous ancestors and a noble coat-of-arms. Brébeuf thus becomes a hero among heroes. All the Jesuits can lay claim to this title and their heroism is

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36. References to the poem are taken from the American edition, The Basilian Press, Detroit, 1942.

collective. The most important and substantial resemblance which the poem bears to the epic is the nature of the deeds the priests perform. The way in which they tackle mammoth obstacles is noble, not desperate. "Above all, in Brébeuf, bigness of deed and character is not made merely spectacular or grotesque, but is heightened into the grand."[37] This is a tribute both to the priests and to the poet.

Poetic technique and mastery of expression are at least as important in the success of the poem as is the narrative material itself. One particularly vivid instance of imagery will serve to illustrate Pratt's command of both language and the mission of the priests. Using imagery found in many of Christ's parables, Pratt merges Christ's mission with that of the Jesuits:

> A year's success flattered the priestly hope
> That on this central field seed would be sown
> On which the yield would be the Huron nation
> Baptized and dedicated to the Faith;
> And that a richer harvest would be gleaned
> Of duskier grain from the same seed on more
> Forbidding ground when the arch-foes themselves
> Would be re-born under the sacred rites. (p.14)

The method of the author in presenting his material in the story of the Jesuits is of particular importance when the ultimate fate of the priests is known by every reader. Pratt wisely concentrates on the experiences of the men in their mission work, and on the events preceding their deaths.

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37. Earle Birney, "Canadian Poem of the Year," Canadian Forum, XX (September, 1940), p. 181.

The use of contrast is great value. Pratt consistently juxtaposes scenes of devotion and faith with others of death and suffering. The effect of this device is simply to heighten the readers' awareness of the power of faith over adverse circumstances. Brebeuf believes his mission in the wilderness to be the outward manifestation of his belief that

> This is the end of man - "Deum laudet,"
> To seek and find the will of God, to act
> Upon it for the ordering of life,
> And for the soul's beatitude. (p. 3)

This simple statement of conviction leads Brébeuf and his fellow missionaries into the dangerous Indian territories, and enables them to withstand

> The forced companionship of dogs that ate
> From the same platters, slept upon his legs
> Or neck; the nausea from sagamite,
> Unsalted, gritty, and that bloated feeling,
> The February stomach touch when acorns,
> Turk's cap, bog-onion bulbs dug from the snow
> And bulrush roots flavoured with eel skin made
> The menu for his breakfast-dinner-supper. (p.5)

The frequent references to hunger, and the poor quality of the food when it is available, make the situation of the priests more readily accessible to the reader. They break through the remoteness of events which occurred three centures before, and place the reader inside the condition of suffering.

The priests are best characterized by their undaunting faith in Christ and their mission. Throughout the poem

Pratt emphasizes the regenerative power of belief and prayer. There are many passages where the strength of the priests seems entirely spent, yet it is restored by meditation. The Indians ultimately associated the black cassocks with the famines, epidemics, and attacks they were experiencing. As a result the priests were subjected to hunger and beatings made the worse because they were inflicted by allegedly-converted Indians. Even under those conditions the priests were sustained by their faith, as is shown in one of the most powerful passages in the poem:

> Met at the doors
> By screams and blows, they would betake themselves
> To the evergreens for shelter over-night
> And often, when the body strength was sapped
> By the day's toil and there were streaks of blood
> Inside the moccasins, when the last lodge
> Rejected them as lepers and the welts
> Hung on their shoulders, then the Fathers sought
> The balm that never failed. Under the stars,
> Along an incandescent avenue
> The visions trembled, tender, placid, pure,
> More beautiful than the doorway of Rheims
> And sweeter than the Galilean fields.
> For what was hunger and the burn of wounds
> In those assuaging, healing moments when
> The clearing mists revealed the face of Mary
> And the lips of Jesus breathing benedictions? (p.35)

Pratt praises the adherence to such a firm belief not in and of itself, but because it provided a stimulus which enabled the Jesuits to continue their mission despite overwhelming odds and dangers. The fact that many priests who had been tortured and maimed by the Indians returned to the colony from safety in France proved that their faith was

unshakeable and their mission worthwhile. Despite starvation and torture, despite witnessing and experiencing destruction and death; the Jesuit missionaries continued the outward as well as the inward practice of their faith. As Pratt tells the stories of Jogues, Bressani, Daniel, Lalement, and Brébeuf, their examples become archetypes in the analysis of human potential. The merger of Pratt's interests in religion and heroism is completed in this poem. Near the end of the poem Pratt presents a passage which summarizes Brébeuf's motivation toward action following Christ's example. It is a passage unequalled in his poetry for power of word and imagery. It appears that Brébeuf's strength has reinforced that of the poet, and they combine to create a magnificent statement of human capability. Brébeuf, overpowered but not defeated, is succumbing to the Iroquois torture, but refuses to cry out in pain.

> Where was the source
> Of his strength, the home of his courage that topped the best
> Of their braves and even out-fabled the lore of their legends?
> In the bunch of his shoulders which often had carried a load
> Extorting the envy of guides at an Ottawa portage?
> The heat of the hatchets was finding a path to that source.
> In the thews of his thighs which had mastered the trails of the Neutrals?
> They would gash and beribbon those muscles. Was it the blood?
> They would draw it fresh from its fountain. Was it the heart?

> They dug for it, fought for the scraps in the way of
> the wolves.
> But not in these was the valour or stamina lodged;
> 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. (pp. 63-64)

The simplicity and strength of Brébeuf's faith is of paramount importance for Pratt. The last few lines of the passage hark back to Pratt's earlier exploration of organized religion. The faith which Pratt regarded as valuable is that which the Jesuit martyrs possessed. It enabled them to perform self-sacrificial acts of heroism, prompted by a pure and simple faith, unencumbered by the formalities of the organized church even though they were priests. Faith was their stimulus; the church was its vehicle. Their mission was to impart the message of Christ in its simplest form. For this purpose, cathedrals were unnecessary. The type of religion exhibited by the Jesuits was Pratt's ideal concept of faith since it guided their lives and prepared them for death. The priests were the ultimate manifestation of Christ's example and they equalled His endurance of death by torture.

The conclusion of Brébeuf and His Brethren returns to the twentieth century and presents the Martyrs' Shrine constructed at Midland, Ontario. The work of the Jesuits is

seen to have been valuable in establishing the Canadian heritage.

> For out of the torch of Ragueneau's ruins the candles
> Are burning today in the chancel of Sainte Marie.
> The Mission sites have returned to the fold of the Order. (p. 66)

Contrary to the subtitle of the American edition of Brebeuf and His Brethren, "The North American Martyrs," Pratt believed that the example set by the priests was, first, relevant to Canadian history and secondly, an inspiration to all men. As he said in a preface to a book describing the discovery of the ruins of a Jesuit mission; "From my point of view the significant fact is that the public may now realize that a site of Christian martyrdom has been discovered and the history of Canada enriched by that discovery."[38] The importance of the Jesuit achievement is in the example it sets. The example of Christ is reinforced by all human acts of heroism whether they are exhibited by priests or sailors. Pratt recognizes the value of collective achievement to which men can aspire if they are sufficiently motivated by faith, an ideal, or need in times of crisis. Each successful self-sacrificial act is held up as a monument to human potential. In Brébeuf and His Brethren the emphasis is placed on the motivations behind the acts. The change in Pratt's analysis of heroism through the narratives is a shift away from glorify-

38. "Foreword", Saint Ignace: Canadian Altar of Martyrdom, ed. W. S. Fox and W. Jury (Toronto, 1949), p. vii.

ing self-sacrificial acts as ends in themselves, and toward establishing examples of goals and beliefs by which men can establish monuments. Pratt's last narrative, Towards the Last Spike is a major statement of Pratt's philosophy that, through adherence to a goal, men can establish monuments of achievement.[39]

The poem deals with a topic which is wholly Canadian both from historical and philosophical viewpoints. The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway was the single most important task in the process of unifying Canada. For Pratt it was not only relevant as a factor in the development of his country, but also it was indicative of the wonders men could perform if they were inspired by a goal. The adherence to an ambition, despite huge obstacles, resulted in the success of the aim and the achievement of the goal. In this sense, the poem is linked to all of Pratt's major narratives in that the result of the struggle is attained through confidence in an aim or faith. Pratt expresses the idea of the aim of building the railroad in terms of courtship. "The Lady of British Columbia" is being sought by two rival lovers, and Canada must create a pathway to her door in order to prove the sincereity of the suit. The task of building two thousand miles of track is absolutely necessary and must be completed within a specified period of time. This is the task which Canada must face and its completion

39. Towards the Last Spike, The Macmillan Company, Toronto, 1952.

is the success which Pratt praises. It is a Canadian story, but one from which all men can take an example of determination and strength of conviction.

As are the sailors of The Roosevelt and the Antinoe, the protagonists of Towards the Last Spike are representative of many nations. The significance of this fact is recognized in two ways by Pratt. The first is the realization that the cultural mosaic of Canada had its roots far back in history, and helped the nation grow even before Confederation. The second is the fact that the best qualities of all nationalities and backgrounds are employed in confronting the mammoth task. The size and type of the project to be completed determines, to a large extent, the nature of the action depicted in the poem. There can be no single hero in the story just as there is no single adversary. Basically the conflict in the poem occurs at three distinct levels. The instigating action is at the political level. The agreement with British Columbia forces Sir John A. Macdonald into the role of protagonist facing the collective antagonists of the Opposition represented by Blake. The Scottish financiers who have conviction and faith in the project are the protagonists who have to face unconvinced sources of capital. In terms of the action of the poem, however, these two conflicts are overshadowed by a third. It is at this level that the conflict resembled most closely Pratt's other narratives.

Van Horne and the team of engineers have to confront the most powerful and dangerous antagonists. Time is a secondary foe they must contend with, but only after they have faced the task of overcoming the rugged Canadian landscape. The only clearly defined adversary in the poem is the pre-Cambrian shield which is personified by the poet:

> On the North Shore a reptile lay asleep-
> A hybrid that the myths might have conceived,
> But not delivered, as progenitor
> Of crawling, gliding things upon the earth.
> She lay snug in the folds of a huge boa
> Whose tail had covered Labrador and swished
> Atlantic tides, whose body coiled itself
> Around the Hudson Bay, then curled up north
> Through Manitoba and Saskatchewan
> To Great Slave Lake. In continental reach
> The neck went past the Great Bear Lake until
> Ita head was hidden in the Arctic Seas. (p. 29)

Despite its personification, the reptile is a passive adversary which can be overcome by men who are sufficiently convinced of their ideal and ability to continue the battle. The men behind the effort to build the railway can be compared to the "genus homo" of "The Truant" in that they are determined to defeat all obstacles. In order to do so they must combat a passive adversary, however, unlike all the other human figures in Pratt's narratives. The story of Towards the Last Spike is not one of heroes overcoming active hostility, but rather of men, who governed by a dream or cause, face all opposition in order to fulfil their goal. This quality is the outcome of Pratt's long exploration of man and his potential. Through commitment to an ideal, man is capable of conquering

all odds in order to achieve the desired end. Nonetheless, each act of commitment is only a part of a sequential process. At the end of Towards the Last Spike Donald Smith falters as he attempts to hammer home the last spike. "The feeling of letdown after prodigious strain is part of the realization that men's work ...is never done, and the moment any act of social heroism is completed, it is absorbed into society and becomes part of new work."[40]

Pratt, then, sees man's capability to accomplish great acts through devotion to a cause as an ongoing evolutionary process. The cause may be belief in an ideal, the code of war or the sea, or religious commitment; but whatever it is, it can help man to aspire to increasing heights of achievement. Man is the measure of all things for Pratt, and his poetry reflects an elaboration of the factors and conditions under which great deeds can be performed. The qualities which men exhibit remain similar from The Roosevelt and the Antinoe to Towards the Last Spike. It is the nature of the adversaries which changes. Nature and man can both present active foes which must be conquered by singularly motivated men. In times of crisis man can more readily respond to need than in times of calm. Nonetheless man is capable of performing great deeds whenever necessary. In fact this ability is, in

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40. Northrop Frye, "Letters in Canada 1952: Poetry," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXII, No. 3 (April, 1952), p. 271.

large measure, the essence of man which separates him from lower species.

There is one final quality which is a necessary part of men's actions before they are considered to be of sublime value. Modesty or humility characterize all Pratt's "heroes." The sailors of the Roosevelt consider their efforts simply part of a day's work. There is one burst of joy after the successful effort, and then it is suppressed. Similarly in Towards the Last Spike cheers follow the completion of the task, but

> It ended when Van Horne spat out some phlegm
> To ratify the tumult with "Well done"
> Tied in a knot of monosyllables. (p. 53)

The men in Pratt's poetry accomplish their great achievements unselfconsciously. The Newfoundland fishermen, the merchant-marine sailors, the Jesuit priests, and the railroad executives are all proud of their accomplishments, but do not revel in any glory. The heroes of Pratt's poetry perform acts of self-sacrifice and determination without regard to personal gain or loss.

In order to understand the motives of the heroes in E. J. Pratt's poetry, and the poet's attitude toward them, it is necessary to take into account the long process by which he developed his views on religion and human potential. Initially there appears to be a dichotomy between the God which allows storms to cause disasters at sea, and the one which inspired Jesuit missionaries to devote their lives

unquestioningly to a pagan world of sacrifice. The first concept of God led Vincent Sharman to maintain that "it is strange that Pratt should expect men to glorify the God who, throughout his poetry, is completely without care for men; who is indeed, amoral...."[41] The second view of God prompted John Sutherland to maintain that, perhaps subconsciously Pratt,was an orthodox Christian. Both these attitudes make a similarly fundamental omission. Pratt clearly differentiates between God, and the example of Christ, whom he regards as human. Pratt's personal commitment was to a devout humanism, by which man became entirely responsible for determining the course of his life; and for this reason he would not accept the concept of a God which he identified with the Great Panjandrum in "The Truant." Nontheless, Pratt recognized the fact that belief in God and adherence to the tenets of the church could inspire men to live exemplary lives and to perform self-sacrificial deeds.

An analysis of Pratt's attitude toward the church and religion is only valuable insofar as it reflects on his concept of man. Pratt's primary interest in his poetry was in man, not in religion. Religion only became important when it was instrumental in enabling man to perform acts of self-sacrificing heroism. Pratt was

...a poet dedicated as never before to dramatizing the deeds

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41. Sharman, p. 22.

> of men: of those who are common, since all have a common lot; of those who are brave, since all living calls for herosim; of those who are free, since all others deserve the name of men. 42

All men are capable of performing deeds similar in commitment to those celebrated in the poetry. It has been suggested that Pratt is characterized by "...his concern with planes of being more spacious and more exalted than the normal life of man."[43] This is a mis-statement of Pratt's concept of man. In fact, Pratt believed that all men, through commitment to a faith, a goal, or a love of humanity, could, in times of crisis or need, demonstrate equally heroic powers of action. "There is nothing existential in Pratt's conception of human behaviour. His characters are always men committed to a course of action: the code of the sea or the drive of the Christian faith or the determination ... to explore and exploit the whole range of human experience."[44]

Man is at the centre of Pratt's personal universe. In the poetic universe God and religion can play important roles in aiding man to achieve his ultimate potential. In both worlds the example of Christ is paramount. Whether He is regarded as human or divine, the adherence to His example

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42. H. F. Wells and C. F. Klinck, Edwin J. Pratt: The Man and His Poetry (Toronto, 1947), pp. 29-30.
43. E. K. Brown, "The Development of Poetry in Canada: 1880-1940," Poetry (Chicago), LVIII, No. 1 (April, 1941) p.41.
44. Beattie, p. 748.

can inspire men to action.

Every man is capable of becoming a hero. The men of Towards the Last Spike are heroes since, through commitment to a goal, they are able to achieve success against huge odds. Heroism in Pratt is not simply the performance of great deeds by one individual. Pratt's heroes perform their acts of self-sacrifice because of a commitment to a specific course. They are also the types of men who prefer iron spikes to gold, and shun praise and congratulations for their deeds. "The conception of heroism in Pratt is of the kind that belongs to our age, and to an industrial democracy. It is the whole group engaged in the quest that is the hero."[45] Any use of the term "heroism" in connection with the poetry of E. J. Pratt must imply collective heroism; men unified by a common faith or goal joined together in the struggle against animate or inanimate adversaries. It should also be noted that Pratt did not postulate constant human perfection or heroism. Underlying each of his poems concerning human action there is the possibility that man will not succeed. In certain situations man's capacity for heroism can be blotted out. The most common cause of the elimination of heroism is overt pride. Pride caused the disaster depicted in The Titanic; sublimation of self-interest produced Brébeuf and His Brethren.

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45. Northrop Frye, "Editor's Introduction." p. xviii.

E. J. Pratt's primary interest was in the achievements of which man was capable, and in the depiction of the situation which gave rise to them. His earliest poetry reflected the traits of the school of Canadian nature poetry, of which, chronologically, he was a member. He turned to a consideration of mankind in all social classes, from poor fisherman to railroad magnate. Pratt neither followed nor started any school of poetry, but drew the best from many literary periods. His reputation, both personal and poetic, has extended over fifty years. Despite the universality of theme, and the wide reputation Pratt has acquired, it has been suggested that his future reputation may be similar to that of Bliss Carman (1861-1929). In an article comparing the reputation of the two poets, Fred Cogswell makes this statement about Pratt's poetry: "Whether it will maintain its popularity upon this continent as society moves further and further in time and living conditions from its frontier origins is unlikely."[46] This view is based on the assumptions that Pratt's poems of the Canadian frontier are interesting only as historical records; that the sea narratives are merely adventure stories; and that the war narratives are only patriotics. There is greater substance to the poetry than this view would allow. In fact, the poetry of Edwin John Pratt explores and encompasses

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46. "E. J. Pratt's Literary Reputation," Canadian Literature, XIX (Winter, 1964), p. 11.

a quintessential element of man. His poems are monuments to human capability, and for this reason the reputation of their author is secure.

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