

Modernizing Pratt

E. J. Pratt, *Selected Poems*. Ed. Sandra Djwa, W. J. Keith and Zailig Pollock. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. xxxii + 244pp.

Here is a complex, forceful, generally useful and gracefully articulated machinery intended to insert the partly derivative, partly unique development of Pratt's work into a larger history of modern poetry. So to accompany a generous selection of Pratt's poems, we have Djwa's introductory essay on "Pratt's Life and Work," which narrates influences upon and transformations of Pratt's style and concerns where modern literary contexts and biographical contexts intersect; we have Pollock's "Textual Note," which provides an attentive overview of variations in printed presentation of the poems and other textual matters; we have a nicely substantive but brief Biographical Chronology for Pratt; we have a Selected Bibliography, and we have a section of Notes that provides not only explanations or references for words and phrases in individual lines, but dates of composition and first publication and other contextual information for each poem. This apparatus not only has scholarly merit, but makes the poetry easier for students to read and for teachers to discuss.

The reader or teacher of 'the poem itself' is free to overlook this machinery, of course, and will find twenty-seven poems selected, Pollock tells us, with the aim of balancing "intrinsic merit and representativeness." This aim seems to me successful, although I agree with the editors that the absence among the long poems included of "The Great Feud" is regrettable. The latter I would consider a fine example of Pratt's fantasy mode, of the linguistic *jouissance* of the baroque tendency in his style, and of his engagement with modern ideas that continue to speak to us, than is the comparatively thin *The Witches' Brew*. But it is a mark of the openness of the editors' approach that this omission is singled out as such, encouraging the interested reader to read beyond the given selection. The small number of poems selected overall is explained by the decision to print only complete poems, including four longer poems. The other three long poems are *The Titanic*, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, and *Towards the Last Spike*.

The reader or teacher who would like obscure or non-English words and allusions explained, and a sense of historical context

from composition and publishing dates and variants, will generally find the Notes quite helpful. In some cases I think the drive to abbreviate notes was excessive. For “The Toll of the Bells,” for instance, I doubt that the reader having trouble with the phrase “Iliad of Death upon the floes” would be much illuminated by the note: “*Iliad of Death*: See Homer’s *Iliad*.” Or in the same poem, for “The tidal triumph of Corinthians,” the note: “See Corinthians 15:20ff.” It seems unnecessarily parsimonious to deny the unenlightened reader a general idea of what such references actually mean. But such over-abbreviation affects only some intertextual notes, and is not typical. It may be that the “much more extensive notes” available on the World Wide Web site intended to “accompany” this book (xxv) will eventually be more forthcoming, although all of the notes which I consulted on the site were identical to those printed in the book. This site, however, is worth mentioning in this review, as a well-constructed, easy-to-use presentation of Pratt’s poetry, which should be of great interest to teachers of Pratt.

Djwa’s introductory essay provides a clear and economical overview of Pratt’s life as it relates to his writing career and interests, and will provide students of Canadian literature an exemplary representation of how uniquely regional and national determinants (e.g. the oral-cultural, public-occasion and ballad traditions of Newfoundland poetry, the literary-nationalist contexts and institutions for modern Canadian poetry) intersect with more general cosmopolitan concerns (e.g. the new technologies, the world wars, the new modernist aesthetics). Such a framework provides a very informed, illuminating view of the development of formal characteristics special to Pratt, such as the documentary poem. Perhaps at times, the representation of Pratt’s modernism—for which Owen, Eliot and Pound are among the canonical reference points—seems overly emphatic. It may be true that “The Ice-Floes” expresses a “modernist irony” and “stark realism” (xiii), but the point has little force if one remains silent about the poem’s more overt conventionality—cast as it is in the unmercifully lilting rhythms and red-blooded, vitalist clichés of popular narrative poetry. The authenticity of Canadian modernism would seem to depend on a more troubled rethinking of the hierarchical distinction, typically maintained in canonical modernism itself, between popular and high-art forms. But the book’s attention to a multiplicity of intellectual and histori-

cal contexts generally provides an excellent model even for this task, to teachers and scholars alike.

Because I have noted the companion web site to the *Selected Poems*, I should not fail to observe the attractive and readable layout which the University of Toronto Press created for the book. The typographic error on the back cover is unfortunate (T. S. Eliot is not hard to spell), and is not the only one of their books with misquotation on the back cover. But William Ritchie's *Caplin* offers a technologically-anxious natural (or perhaps vice-versa) imagery for the front cover, perfectly appropriate to the poems within.

Glenn Willmott