

The Christian Pratt

Angela T. McAuliffe. *Between the Temple and the Cave: the Religious Dimensions of the Poetry of E.J. Pratt*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. 250 pp.

During the 1990s a total of three articles about E.J. Pratt were published, all in *Canadian Poetry*. This number marks a significant falling off from the eleven articles of the 1980s. Although Pratt has always been understood as someone not entirely in step with his own times, David Bentley (quoted on the jacket of Angela McAuliffe's book) is modestly understating the case when he describes Pratt's current status as "undervalued." Pratt's case may be isolated, or it may be symptomatic of the existing state of Canadian literary studies, especially if Robert Lecker's recent analysis is considered an accurate assessment. His description of the publishing costs involved in producing the secondary literature on Canadian novelists and poets suggests a number of reasons for the existing paucity, including government funding policies and changing practices in the book publishing industry. Lecker's survey notes a "dramatic decrease" (15) in the number of critical works on Canadian literature published in the past several years: 32 in 1997; 15 in 1998; and 7 in 1999.

A book-length study of Pratt from one of our major university presses is therefore to be welcomed. McAuliffe's book has evidently been in preparation for many years (the interviews she cites were conducted in 1974: n. 76, 215). It is also the product of a sensibility no longer in wide evidence in Canadian university departments of English. Gender, race, and class are not part of McAuliffe's approach to Pratt and his poetry. Biography and close readings are, and these methods nicely complement the object of her inquiry: how Pratt's religion affects and informs his poetry.

Pratt's critics are characteristically anxious to situate his conceptual position and therefore feel obliged to re-iterate the different identities their antecedents have ascribed to him.¹ These identities include Christian humanist (Northrop Frye and Desmond Pacey), atheist (Vincent Sharman), agnostic (though moral: Peter Buitenhuis), corporate man (Frank Davey), "social existentialist" (Robert Collins, 194), together with other interpretations that designate a dominant myth animating his work (such as evolution for Sandra

Djwa or “achievement” in the case of Glenn Clever). One senses from these often mutually-exclusive labels that the poet’s work has been a mirror in which critics have seen their own preoccupations; meanwhile, Pratt’s vision continues to outflank the limits of formulaic tags.

McAuliffe wisely declines to repeat this litany of critical identities. Nevertheless, her debate with predecessors is actively carried on in both her text and her notes. Her Pratt is no ideologue but a Christian man fully conscious of the “precariousness of human existence” (68), and this sensibility is in tune with the psychological climate fostered by social upheaval (war and depression) in spite of steadily advancing technological developments. From this kind of perspective she refutes, corrects, or qualifies an array of critics, including the following (these asides occur in her notes): Sandra Djwa in Pratt’s handling of Strauss (n. 96, 209) and the influence of Darwinism (n. 19, 216); Peter Buitenhuis on the reason for Pratt’s leaving the ministry (n. 59, 207); Margaret Atwood for oversimplifying Pratt’s position about man’s relationship with nature (n. 23, 216); Frank Birbalsingh and John Sutherland for misunderstanding a passage in “The Cachalot” (n. 12, 219); and Vincent Sharman and Glenn Clever on interpretations of “Brébeuf and His Brethren” (n. 80, 226). While some of these targets are, admittedly, distant in time, McAuliffe clearly wants to establish the validity and relevance of her own argument in Pratt criticism.²

Just as satirists are notoriously difficult to pin down as far as their own intellectual values are concerned, so the kind of “dramatic objectivity” McAuliffe thinks characteristic of Pratt’s narrative poetry presents a similar kind of dilemma for commentators wishing to fix his identity. In fact, her book is written in response to the “wide spectrum of interpretation” (vii) that marks descriptions of Pratt’s attitudes toward religion, and Christianity in particular. One of the major strengths of McAuliffe’s study is that she has examined primary sources either overlooked, under-utilized, or unavailable to earlier critics, including Pratt’s lecture notes, interviews, his father’s sermons, the United Church archives and other church documents, talks or papers he gave, unpublished poems, hymns, correspondence, and the two theses submitted to Victoria College. McAuliffe even uncovered a 1957 letter from Pratt to Dorothy Doyle in which he pointed to lyric poems he had written that “contain undercurrents” of his religious “convictions” (ix).

Chapter 1 focuses on Pratt's Methodist background, his childhood and adolescence as the son of a zealous, conservative clergyman in the Wesleyan tradition. McAuliffe gives an excellent summary of the constrained home life Pratt experienced. Religious observance dominated the rhythm of life with daily family prayer, weekly class meetings, regular revival services and testimony meetings. Behaviour was strictly controlled: no drinking, smoking, dancing, card-playing, gambling and no attending theatre, circus, horse racing or exhibitions of dancing. After study in St. John's, Newfoundland, Pratt came to Victoria in 1907 and eventually achieved an M.A. (1912), B.D. (1913), and Ph.D. (1917). Marriage in 1918 and then the well-timed offer of a position in the Department of English at Victoria permitted him a gracious exit from his earlier commitment to theology. McAuliffe believes that "Pratt's own experience in the pulpit had convinced him that his talents did not lie there" (35). In any case, the Methodism of his father was disappearing, and Church union was imminent. Victoria's theology school was becoming increasingly open to advanced historical and critical methods of interpreting the Bible, and he also responded to its receptivity to science and psychology. This is not to say, however, that McAuliffe accepts the idea that Pratt's faith was undermined during his years of study. She finds no documented evidence that he suffered any religious crisis during this period, that he (in Djwa's words) "seriously questioned religious beliefs."³ It was not uncommon, after all, to enter education after ordination. In any case, Pratt continued to attend church, felt no need to resign from the ministry, and remained on the membership list of the Red Deer Presbytery through 1960.

McAuliffe also devotes a good deal of this opening chapter to examining both Pratt's theses in some detail: "The Demonology of the Synoptics in Its Relation to Earlier Developments and to the Mind of Christ" and *Studies in Pauline Eschatology and Its Background* (this latter thesis was published). The common ground between the two exercises was Pratt's anti-dogmatic ("unmasked distrust of theological speculation" 23) and contextualist outlook. For McAuliffe, Pratt neither denies Christ's divinity nor the possibility of his second coming, and both theses stress "Christian action and conduct" (34) in a characteristically Methodist manner.

Chapter 2 focuses on Pratt's religious principles. McAuliffe suggests that his central problem was reconciling "the power and jus-

tice attributed to God with divine love and mercy” (40), a difficulty she traces to seventeenth-century Protestantism and the breach between reason and faith. Pratt’s poetry is “haunted” by these and other tensions, including the challenge that liberalizing trends in Protestant theology and Darwinism posed. The image of the Calvinist God in Pratt’s work may sometimes carry ironically negative associations, such as indifference or impersonality (the God of *The Truant* is a destructive force), but McAuliffe maintains that it can equally be merciful and compassionate (as in *Brébeuf and His Brethren* or *The Titanic*). The unpublished and unfinished *Clay* (c. 1917-20) dramatizes different points of view on theological questions. The character of Julian in *Clay*, for example, is “overcome by the problem of evil” (54), abandons faith, idolatrously makes a god in his own image, and ends in depression. In a similar way, the later *The Iron Door* (1927) presents a series of individuals, each with a different understanding of God. Evidently, Pratt implies that “God transcends all humanly limited or false concepts” (61). It would be a serious mistake, McAuliffe stresses, to identify Pratt’s personal outlook with the limited perspective of one of his characters like Julian or one of the images of God presented in *The Iron Door*. Once again, McAuliffe finds no documented evidence that Pratt denied the existence of God.

Chapter 3 uses the literary form, apocalypse, to approach elements of Pratt’s own poetry, its awareness of sin and its use of the dream vision, for example. McAuliffe uses the key Christian concepts of sin, death, judgement, hell, and Satan to test, and confirm, the orthodoxy of Pratt’s poetry. For example, sin appears as “regressive selfishness” (70) in “The Great Feud,” as injustice and inequality elsewhere, or as hubris in *The Titanic*. Death is everywhere in the short lyrics and she traces its appearance as “Leveller” (84) and “as birth” (89). Pratt is more reticent about Hell and normally employs classical antecedents to convey the chaos or suffering caused by evil or natural disaster. Similarly, the figure of Satan seldom appears as his conventional self but rather as the evil he symbolizes is refracted through images of natural destruction (103) or the “barbaric wastefulness” (111) caused by the “monstrous” war machines (105).

Chapter 4 examines fate and determinism in Pratt’s poetry and how these qualities are not “inconsistent with belief in God” (123). McAuliffe links the ambiguity which Pratt thought part of nature with the ambiguity he saw in humanity and provides many exam-

ples of each. Pratt's sense of fatalism and irony is most obviously developed in *The Titanic*, the "product of a secular society that has become blinded and desensitized by purely materialistic values" (145), but McAuliffe argues that his sense of causality is complex. She again demonstrates, for example, that to identify Pratt's "personal philosophy" (147) as stoical (as she shows Paul West doing) would ignore Pratt's own remarks about the inadequacy of stoicism. Similarly, she cites Pratt's understanding that the purely rational can become "arrogant" (155), and so she can fault assertions made by critics as different as Davey and Sutherland. In these instances she draws on those less well known sources she has uncovered.

Chapter 5 examines comparatively minor and unpublished poems from the 1920s and 1930s to demonstrate that "Christological concerns" (157) were not limited to Pratt's theses but also appear in religious poems as well as hymns he subsequently wrote and published in church periodicals. Contemporary issues are viewed in Pratt's "A Prayer Medley," for example, through the lens of Christian morality and with allusions to scripture and Wesleyan assumptions. McAuliffe uses a series of short lyrics to highlight aspects of Pratt's religious convictions. For example, she draws on her own extensive knowledge of Christian tradition to illuminate "The Highway." A brief excursion into the image of the suffering servant leads to her conclusion that the Son of Man in this poem represents "both the finest product of the natural evolutionary process and the fulfillment of humanity's highest religious hopes" (177).

McAuliffe ends her study with a detailed analysis of *Brébeuf and His Brethren* and believes that it reflects a "comprehensive embrace of the fullness of the Christian vision" (161). Her commentary on the poem follows some introductory remarks in which Pratt is shown to have mourned the twentieth-century rejection of Christianity and the decline in the ideals of self-sacrifice or service of others. The religious fervour Pratt found in *Brébeuf* and the Jesuits spoke directly, McAuliffe believes, to his own evangelical formation and such connections allowed him to feel "surprisingly at home in the atmosphere of Ignatian spirituality" (187), the mystical experiences of the Jesuits even finding an echo in the kind of conversion experiences found in the traditional Methodism.

Between the Temple and the Cave is written with clarity and is the result of much research and reflection. It offers corrective readings,

discloses new contexts for reading Pratt's poetry, points to needed modifications in a variety of critical assumptions, and skillfully negotiates Pratt's elusive ironies. In offering her religious reading of Pratt, McAuliffe is herself alert to embedded scriptural echoes in his poetry that may have escaped less biblically literate readers. If her own bias (I assume she is a Roman Catholic) may occasionally affect her readings (for example, of *Brébeuf and His Brethren* in which she sees no criticism of the Jesuits' treatment of the Hurons), then this slight cost is worth the value of having a sustained explication of Pratt from a Christian point of view. There is one portion of the book in which a reader's attention may flag, and that is in chapter 2 where the cataloguing of Christian images in Pratt's poetry becomes strained and perfunctory. Otherwise, the argument is conducted with authority and conviction. The Christian dimensions of Pratt's poetry have been too long missing from the secondary literature, and this book admirably addresses that lack.

Notes

- 1 For example, see the opening section of R.D. MacDonald's article, 17-21.
- 2 The absence of any references to Robert Collins' book about Pratt is, however, troublesome.
- 3 Editor's Introduction to Pratt's *Selected Poems*, xi.

Works Cited

- Collins, Robert. *E.J. Pratt*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988.
- Lecker, Robert. "Would You Publish This Book?: Material Production, Canadian Criticism, and The Theatre of Form." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 25.1 (2000): 15-36.
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