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THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

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N E L A B U R E U i R A M O S

spirits since the weak were likely to perish without ever experiencing its invigorating power:

> *Depuis Wordsworth on avait l'habitude de voir dans la nature un bien agréable même salutaire, où l'on pouvait échapper au soucis de la vie quotidienne. Or, les premiers poètes qui cherchèrent a chanter le Canada avec une voix nouvelle, c'est à dire effectivement à partir de Charles G.D. Roberts, étaient déjà nourris de ce sentiment dès leurs premières études. Et c'est justement cette attitude qui, nous en sommes persuadés, est au fond de leur malaise vis-à-vis de la nature canadienne. Car comment peut-on concilier l'idée de la nature réparatrice et celle de la nature telle qu'elle est parfois au Canada, dure, impitoyable, effrayante?. La plupart de poètes ont été poussés à épousser l'idée que la nature canadienne est un refuge seulement pour les caractères forts, car les faibles périssent sans jamais le gagner.(*8)*

The writings of the Confederation poets contain enough evidence to support Ross's argument. In his book The Friendship of Nature, Bliss Carman writes:

> *There is in reality a power in Nature to rest and console us but few are so strong as to be able to rely on that lonely beneficence; and we must seek the gentler aid of our fellow beings. Indeed, only those who are humane at heart can rightly hear the obscure word of Nature; while those who have been reared not far from the wild school of the forest make the best citizens and friends.(*9)*

This extract condenses the characteristics of Canadian Romanticism as summarized by Ross in the previous quotation. The Romantic belief that nature is doubly precious because it exalts the spirit and leads to love of man pervades Carman's words, but the idea that only the strong subsist in defiance of natural rigours is also present. The poet suggests that to weak characters, nature's superabundant vitality may be oppressive rather than comforting or invigorating because it is a constant reminder of man's puny forces. When this happens, the individual finds solace in the companionship of those who have withstood and derived strength from nature's exuberance.

With these ideas in mind it is difficult not to interpret the mood of exultation that permeates the poetry of the Confederation group as a celebration of Canada's northern location and its positive influence on the shaping of national character. Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott offer us clear examples of the belief in the purifying and fortifying effects of northern latitudes. In "Storm", for instance, Lampman

depicts the Canadian wilderness as a battlefield where man tests himself by contesting with 'thongless' forces that bring out the best in him. The poem abounds with images that magnify the savage and beautiful character of the Canadian landscape and help the poet underline man's heroic dimension. The human and the natural world are presented as two manifestations of life's fiery spirit at its highest and fullest expression:

> ***Nay, Wind, I hear you, desperate brother, in your might***
> ***Whistle and howl; I shall not tarry long,***
> ***And though the day be blind and fierce, the night***
> ***Be dense and wild, I still am glad and strong***
> ***To meet you face to face; through all your gust and drifting***
> ***With brow held high, my joyous hands uplifting,***
> ***I cry you song for song.(*10)***

These lines suggest that in Canada, the sense of brotherhood with nature is a difficult achievement demanding unusual strength and courage and that man's physical and moral greatness is attested to by his potential identity with nature.

Duncan Campbell Scott also puts forth the same ideas and, more than any other Confederation poet, he makes the reader feel the presence of a

northern environment. Scott knew the Arctic and Subarctic regions very well because as a civil servant in the Department of Indian Affairs he made frequent tours of inspection in the Northwest Territories and established contact with its people and landscape. This experience provided him with material for a number of lyrics such as "The Height of Land" set in the area between Hudson Bay and Lake Superior, one of the regions Scott visited as a Commisioner to negotiate with the natives. The detailed description of a Subarctic site from which 'The spruces have retired' leaving a 'field of sky in violet shadow/ with stars like marigold in a water-meadow' transforms the spiritual into a tangible reality within man's reach.(*11) Like Lampman and the other members of the group, Scott emphasizes the spiritual dynamism fostered by an extremely harsh and cold environment by contrasting it with the moral stagnation bred by teeming southern regions full of 'slimy viscid things the spirit loathes':

> ***Here on the uplands where the air is clear***
> ***We think of life as of a stormy scene,-***
> ***Of tempest, of revolt and desperate shock;***
> ***And here, where we can think, on the bright uplands***
> ***Where the air is clear, we deeply brood on life***

Until the tempest parts, and it appears
As simple as to the shepherd seems his flock:
A Something to be guided by ideals-
That in themselves are simple and serene-
Of noble deed to foster noble thought,
*And noble thought to image noble deed.(*12)*

At first sight, the contrast between 'The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams' and 'The crowded southern land/ with all the welter of the lives of men' (*13) is simply the Romantic idealisation of nature which, incidentally, coincides with a puritan attitude since there are implicit elements of austerity that urge man to renounce material pleasures and embrace the more ascetic delight that nature offers him. However, Scott's references to the salutary effects of the North also bespeak a sensitive northerner who feels the responsibility of contributing to the task of racial advancement.

At this point, it will be enlightening to quote the words of Lawren Harris a member of The Group of Seven, the most famous school of painting in Canadian history. These artists who were born as a group in the first decade of this century

shared the enthusiasm of the Confederation poets and their conviction that Canada's northern quality was the country's most distinctive personality marker. In 1926 Harris wrote:

> *We in Canada are in different circumstances than the people in the United States. Our population is sparse, the psychic atmosphere comparatively clean, whereas the States fill up and the massed crowd a heavy psychic blanket over nearly all the land. We are on the fringe of the great North, and its living whiteness, its loneliness and replenishment, its resignation and release, its call and answers - its cleansing rhythms. It seems that the top of the continent will ever shed clarity into the growing race of America, and we Canadians being closest to this source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our southern fellows - an art more spacious, of greater living quiet, perhaps of more certain conviction of eternal values. We were not placed between the Southern teeming of men and the ample replenishing of North for nothing.(*14)*

Like the Confederation poets, the painters of the Group of Seven felt compelled to stir patriotic feelings by endowing their country with values which Canadians could feel proud of and like them, they found these values in the northern wilderness. Canadian nationality was definitely connected with the North, with its rugged beauty and the purifying effects of its cold weather.

Harris's words also contain a clear reference to the moral superiority of northern people, a belief that was greatly influenced by Darwin's theories which proved to be one of the greatest factors in the development of Western poetic thought during the nineteenth century.

4.2.- THE CONFEDERATION POETS AND DARWINISM

If Romanticism had provided the Confederation poets with a philosophy that was congenial with their own outlook on nature, Darwin's evolutionary theories offered them the possibility of giving scientific support to their belief that Canada's greatness sprung from its priviledged geographical location.

In a country where the natural forces manifested themselves with unsuspected majesty and man could see the struggle for existence in

actual operation, the evolutionary principle and the idea of cruelty in nature were not a revelation. Besides, as the rigours of the Canadian environment demanded that man use his physical and mental faculties to the fullest, the notion of survival was already of paramount importance among Canadians. What the Confederation poets did was to use the theory of evolution to endow the Canadian wilderness with further might and to ennoble man's attempts to adjust to this kind of environment. Thus, when these artists described the special qualities of the Canadian landscape and celebrated its invigorating effects, they were not only aligning themselves with Romantic tenets but were also implicitly proclaiming the superiority of northern races. However, it must be pointed out that, although this claim inevitably entails some sort of contempt for peoples from southern latitudes, the Confederation poets and the members of the Group of Seven were first and foremost moved by the evangelical zeal that pervades the words of the painter Lawren Harris quoted previously.

In Canada, the price of survival was not only physical vigour but moral uprightness as well. The land demanded the preservation of such qualities as strength, courage and stoical endurance to withstand nature's onslaught, and also generosity, trust and loyalty because in a wild and sparsely-settled country friendship was often more valuable than material wealth. For these reasons, Canadian artists saw their country as a reservoir of spiritual values and believed that it had to play a leading role in the bettering of mankind.

This was evolutionary idealism or the belief that the Darwinian germ of life and the Christian world spirit evolved in parallel fashion. It could not have been otherwise because the Confederation poets had deep religious convictions and were the spokesmen of an intensely religious society. Like their British contemporaries, they felt compelled to place the evolutionary principle within a religious framework thereby endowing the amoral world of science with spiritual significance. Darwin had somehow pushed God to a point beyond the Genesis account of Creation through the

postulate that man's origins could be traced back from presently existing forms. He had further alarmed religious minds by reducing man to a more or less accidental production of the blind forces of natural selection. The Confederation poets brought God back to the scene and restored man's hopes and dignity as Lionel Stevenson suggests in the following quotation:

> *There are two outstanding notions which the poets contribute to the evolutionary theory - or which the evolutionary theory contributes to the poets, for the relation is mutual. One is that the process was conceived and initiated by God, so that every phase has its meaning in the divine plan; the other is that the process is not yet complete - that man's progress is infinitessimal in comparison with the progress which he must still make before perfection is attained.(*15)*

Stevenson also remarks that this religious view of evolution brought Canadian artists closer to nature:

> *Probably the first effect of the new doctrine was a more intimate sense of kinship with the lower orders of nature - with animals and plants and particularly with earth herself. Since man was shown to be no longer a superior being created to enjoy the submission of all other creatures, but had been shaped by the same forces at work in nature, the poet felt himself*

a brother to the beast and flower for like them
*he was son of the Ancient Mother.(*16)*

This idea which underlines the poetry of the Confederation artists is especially present in Archibald Lampman's descriptions of landscape. In "Storm", for instance, the poet addresses the wind as 'desperate brother' and in "Comfort of the Fields" he invokes nature as 'The mighty mother' who 'brings us in her hands'.(*17) But it is in the poem "On the Companionship with Nature" that the poet's sense of brotherhood with all existing creatures is more evident:

Let us be much with Nature; not as they
That labor without seeing, that employ
Her unloved forces, blindly without joy;
Nor those whose hands and crude delights obey
The old brute passion to hunt down and slay;
But rather as children of one common birth,
Discerning in each natural fruit of earth
Kinship and bond with this diviner clay.
Let us be with her wholly at all hours,
With the fond lover's zest, who is content
If his ear hears, and if his eye but sees;
So shall we grow like her in mold and bent,
Our bodies stately as her blessed trees,
*Our thoughts as sweet and sumptuous as her flowers.(*18)*

This identification with nature only strengthened the Confederation poet's pride in being northerners. If man had been shaped by the same forces at work in the natural world it was sensible to assume that the measure of his physical and spiritual greatness was given by the power of these elemental forces which in Canada happened to manifest themselves with unsuspected magnitude.

The optimism generated by these beliefs was further intensified by the postulates of American Transcendentalism. This literary trend, which was a deified version of Romanticism current in the States from the 1830s onwards, helped the Confederation poets reconcile evolutionary hypothesis with the existence of a divine force that had initiated the whole process in order to direct it towards some sublime yet unrevealed end.

4.3.— THE CONFEDERATION POETS AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

The Romantic idea that man was akin to earth as a physical being led to the following questions: why should earth not be akin to man as a spiritual being? and if this is so, can we not assume the existence of a world soul immanent in all created beings?. This pantheistic vision of the universe was also shared by Wordsworth and with less conviction by Coleridge. However, the insistence on nature's divine character so pervasive in the works of the American Transcendentalists is never as strong in the poetry of the English Romantics. Transcendentalism presented nature as having a mysterious relation with divinity though this divine being was often perceived as existing outside the boundaries of specific religions. Rather than postulating the existence of a Christian God, Transcendentalist poets wrote about a supreme intelligence from a sublime and unimaginable dimension that manifested itself through all created beings, directing the

whole universe towards a glorious goal beyond man's comprehension. For these reasons, they believed that man's greatest pleasure was his feeling of communion with all existing creatures. Immersion in nature was therefore necessary, but it had to be spiritual as well as physical because only the soul could intuitively understand the eternal language of nature's beauty.

This philosophy clashed with Christianity because it implied that every created being, animate or inanimate, possessed a soul. To a Christian, only man was made in the image of God and was consequently superior to plants and animals devoid of spiritual qualities and created for his own delight and benefit. However, in spite of this difference between Transcendentalist and Christian tenets, Transcendentalism did not alarm Christian minds for, unlike Darwinism, which had somehow ushered God out of the universe, it constantly invoked the presence of a divine spirit, marvelled at the beauty of his creation and insisted on man's freedom to follow his own instincts and insights in his quest for

transcendence. This insistence on individualism was precisely a major Protestant tenet since Protestantism rejects the idea that the individual needs intermediaries to communicate with God. Besides, as the love of freedom was the main pillar of the American Republic, Transcendentalism was never seen as a threat but as the poetic expression of American values.

The Confederation poets were especially receptive to Transcendentalism for various reasons. The first one is that Emerson and the other Transcendentalists were native to a land which was in many ways similar to the region where the Confederation poets were born, that is, the North Atlantic coast and the Great Lakes area. When Campbell, Roberts, Carman, Lampman and Scott read the poetry of the American Transcendentalists they experienced the pleasure of recognition, a feeling that British Romantic poetry could not elicit from them in the same way and with the same intensity.

The Confederation poets also shared the Transcendentalists' belief that a northern climate promotes physical and moral health and it is in this context that the following words by Henry David Thoreau must be interpreted:

> *In civilisation as in a southern latitude, man degenerates at length and yields to the incursion of more northern tribes.(*19)*

As Transcendentalists saw God in nature, it is understandable that the awesome grandeur of the North American landscape led these poets to think of themselves as the main beneficiaries of God's grace. Hence, the religious reverence that the contemplation of the wilderness elicits from them. Hence too the priest-like tone that pervades most of their poems implicitly urging their fellow countrymen to seek the sublime experience by immersion in an environment so vast and beautiful as to provide the individual with intimations of God. When Wilfred Campbell writes:

> *You ask me where I get these thoughts,*
> *These dreams melodious, mystical,*
> *I read them in God's book of Lore*
> *Wide open, splendid by my door.*

Its pages are the magic sky,
The wonder of the iron earth,
And the dreams that time left fly
*Since being's earliest birth. (*20)*

he is not only celebrating nature's beauty and God's glory but also his closeness to the Divine Being by virtue of Canada's northern character.

One of the lyrics that best illustrates this feeling is Scott's "The Height of Land" a poem that has been partly analysed in the section dealing with the influence of Romanticism on the work of Confederation artists. In this poem, Scott expresses the evolution of spiritual perception as a continuing ascending process which he likens to a northward journey. The physical vertical ascent to the Arctic is not only used as a symbol of the soul's purifying upward movement towards the ideal but also, and above all, as the cause of man's spiritual expansion. The terms of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual are presented in such a way that the reader is less impressed by the soul's progress than by the environment that has made it possible. Scott

emphasises physicality thereby suggesting that it is through the physical world that man achieves transcendence. Given that in "The Height of Land" the physical world has concrete northern features the message becomes clear: the virgin lands of the Arctic which are the symbol of Canada's northern values emerge as a unique environment and a reservoir of sanctity:

The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams,
And the enormous targe of Hudson Bay,
Glimmering all night
In the cold Arctic light;
On the other hand
The crowded southern land
With all the welter of the lives of men.
But here is peace, and again
That Something comes by flashes
Deeper than peace,- a spell
Golden and inappellable
That gives the inarticulate part
Of our strange being one moment of release
That seems more native than the touch of time,
And we must answer in chime;
Though yet no man may tell
The secret of that spell
*Golden and inappellable.(*21)*

I have deliberately returned to "The Height of Land" to end this section on the Confederation poets because it fuses Romantic, Darwinian and Transcendentalist tenets into a harmonious whole showing how early Canadian artists adapted these

literary and philosophical trends to suit the Canadian personality.

As has already been pointed out, the Romantic atmosphere is created by the contrast between nature's soothing power and the oppressive environment of the city. Scott's poem also illustrates the difference between British and Canadian Romanticism. In "The Height of Land" the relationship man-nature, nature-man acquires a significance that goes beyond the mere Romantic celebration of the salutary effects of the physical world on the individual. Man in the wilderness takes on a grandeur that surpasses the values Wordsworth ascribes to his poetic personae. When Scott refers to 'That Something' which 'Comes by flashes/ Deeper than peace,- a spell/ Golden and inappellable' he implies that the Canadian experience poses problems of nomenclature.(*22) The North is a unique environment that triggers off thoughts too deep for words and literary conventions.

The poet also wonders about the role of the artist and seems to suggest that his function is to warn man of his intellectual and spiritual arrogance and to remind him that progress will come from acceptance and respect of natural laws:

(...) Shall the poet then,
Wrapped in his mantle on the height of land,
Brood on the welter of the lives of men
And dream of his ideal hope and promise
In the blush sunrise?
(...)
(...) Shall he stand
With deeper joy, with more complex emotion,
In closer commune with divinity,
With the deep fathomed, with the firmament charted,
With life as simple as a sheep-boy's song,
What lies beyond a romaunt that was read
Once upon a morn of storm and laid aside
Memorious with strange immortal memories?
Or shall he see the sunrise as I see it
In schoals of misty fire the deluge-light
Dashes upon and whelms with purer radiance,
And feel the lulled earth, older in pulse and motion,
Turn the rich lands and inundant oceans
To the flushed colour, and hear as I now hear
The thrill of life beat up the planet's margin
And break in the clear susurrus of deep joy
*That echoes and reëchoes in my being? (*23)*

This note of humility that places the beauty and instinctive wisdom of nature above the knowledge of science and orthodox religion, also brings Transcendentalism into focus with its emphasis on the elemental joy that man derives

from his sense of kinship with the natural world. However, the poet's mood of exultation does not deaden the echoes of Darwin's philosophy heard intermittently throughout the poem and also in the final lines:

> *And do I stand with heart entranced and burning*
> *At the zenith of our wisdom when I feel*
> *The long light flow, the long wind pause, the deep*
> *Influx of spirit, of which no man may tell*
> *The Secret, golden and inappellable? (*24)*

Indeed, the sense of fulfilment that pervades this stanza has Darwinian overtones which may be more clearly perceived if we recall the different stages the poem contains. "The Height of Land" begins with a sense of achievement, with the conviction that the geographical location of the percipient dictates his psychic response to reality and accounts for the quality and intensity of his perception. Then, the artist retraces his steps downwards to less entrancing regions where the pull of disorder is intensely felt and takes us up again to the "Height of Land", the great North where man stands 'at the zenith' of his wisdom. The rhetorical question at the end of the

lyric may be interpreted as the poet's desire to apologize for an excess of pride. In other words, Scott seems to be questioning all the ideas he has put forth in previous stanzas. However, a closer analysis reveals that the poet's uncertainty may also be seen as a way of stressing the superiority of the northern experience because, at its highest and fullest expression, life is doubt and perpetual inquiry.

As in the work of his contemporaries, Scott's allusion to the superiority of the northern experience is sublimated by imagination and meditation until it transcends the physical and becomes mystical although, as we have seen, from time to time, the belief of being a priviledged northern race emerges here and there when artists are not seized by spiritual rapture.

This well-blended mixture of racial pride, philanthropic feelings and pantheistic fervour which characterises the poetry of the Confederation writers thrust the wilderness forcibly into the Canadian mind. Canada suddenly

became beautiful and its people the inheritors of the vigour and courage of northern peoples. It is to the credit of the Confederation poets and the painters of the Group of Seven that they stirred Canadian ideals and pioneered the tracks of a positive Canadian tradition.

This literary trend initiated by the first Canadian harvest of poets and painters has never been broken. In the first half of this century it was followed by E.J. Pratt's vigorous narratives where the harshness of Canada's northern landscape continues to bear testimony to the physical and moral vigour of its inhabitants. The most distinctive feature of this poet is that the Canadian environment is seen to increase in scale and power to fantastic, mythic proportions and that his heroes, who are ultimately the embodiment of Canadian society, acquire the same epic dimensions as the landscape in which they are immersed.

THE NORTH : CHAPTER FOUR. NOTES

1. Archibald Lampman, as quoted by G. Ross Roy in Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise. Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1961, p.14.

2. Charles G.D. Roberts, "Origins" in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol.I, Russell Brown & Donna Bennet, (eds.). Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 163-164.

3. Bliss Carman, "Morning in the Hills", ibid., p.175.

4. Archibald Lampman, "Comfort of the Hills", in Canadian Anthology, Carl Klinck & Reginald E. Watters, (eds.). Toronto: Gage, 1974, pp.127-128.

5. Wilfred Campbell, "How One Winter Came in the Lake Region", in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol. I, op. cit., pp.153-154.

6. Archibald Lampman, "In November", ibid., pp.183-184.

7. Ibid.

8. G.Ross Roy, Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise, op. cit., p.196. My translation:

Since Wordsworth, nature was seen as something pleasurable and salutary where man could escape the problems of everyday life. This feeling is present in the work of the first Canadian poets who, from the time of Charles G.D. Roberts, sought to celebrate Canada with a new voice. We are convinced that this feeling accounts for the sense of uneasiness that pervades their vision of nature. Indeed, how is it possible to reconcile the idea of nature as a healing environment with the reality of the Canadian wilderness, which is sometimes cold, merciless and frightening?. The majority of poets were forced to embrace the idea that nature in Canada is a shelter only for strong characters since the weak are likely to perish without ever achieving communion with it.

9 Bliss Carman, The Kinship of Nature. Toronto: Page, (1903), 1913, pp.142-143.

10. Archibald Lampman, "Storm", in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol.I, op. cit., pp.181-182.

11. Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Height of Land", ibid., pp.207-210.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Lawren Harris, as quoted by Ramsay Cook in "Imagining a North American Garden", Canadian Literature, n.103, Winter 1984, p.17.

15. Lionel Stevenson, Appraisals in Canadian Literature. Toronto: MacMillan, 1926, p.95.

16. Ibid., p.80.

17. Archibald Lampman, "Comfort of the Fields", in Canadian Anthology, op. cit., pp.127-129.

18. Archibald Lampman, "On the Companionship with Nature", ibid., p.133.

19. Henry David Thoreau, as quoted by Allison Mitcham in The Northern Imagination. A Study of Northern Canadian Literature. Ottawa: Penumbra Press, 1983, p.11.

20. Wilfred Campbell, "My Library", as quoted by G.Ross Roy in Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise, op. cit., p.121.

21. Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Height of Land" in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol.I, op. cit., pp.206-210.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EPIC PHASE: E. J. PRATT

E.J. Pratt dominates Canadian poetry in the first half of the 20th century and provides an essential link between the attitudes and assumptions of the Confederation poets on the one hand and modern literary principles and practice on the other. He is therefore a transitional poet who bridges the gap between the traditional and the contemporary and this implies that he may be approached from both sides or perspectives.

Pratt's poetry contains two basic ideas which are also present in the work of the Confederation artists, namely, that nature in Canada is extremely vast and awesome and that man derives physical and moral strength from his contact with this northern environment. However, the arguments Pratt uses to support these ideas as well as the idiom he adopts to articulate them differ in many ways from the style and assumptions of his predecessors. One basic difference between the writings of E.J. Pratt and the poetry of the Confederation group lies in Pratt's realistic stance towards the natural world, a stance that places him in the context of modern poetry for, as I.A. Richards points out, one of the most outstanding characteristics of contemporary verse is the secularization of nature:

> ***The transference from the Magical View of the world to the scientific, a change so great that it is perhaps only parallelled historically by the change from whatever adumbration of a world picture preceded the Magical View, to the Magical View itself. (*1)***

By the Magical view Richards means the

spiritual conception of nature, the belief that the physical world has a significance which is not subject to scientific explanation.

As we have seen, this stance was adopted by the Confederation poets who saw the Canadian landscape as being permeated by a divine spirit that transformed it into a beneficial environment in spite of its roughness. In contrast to this view, Pratt stresses the mechanistic and dangerous nature of his physical surroundings thereby destroying the illusion of the wilderness as an expression of beatitude. For the first time, the evil and destructive element inherent in the natural world is fully admitted into Canadian poetry.

To a great extent, Pratt's realistic vision of nature is due to his chilhood experiences. He was born and brought up on the coast of Newfoundland, an extremely harsh environment that put a premium on the daring qualities that ensure human survival. His early poems are saturated with maritime imagery and references to the high death

toll the sea imposed on the Newfoundland fishing communities. His poem "Erosion" is especially poignant for it reproduces the ravaging force of the elements and the stoical endurance of the people who were acquainted with death as a tragically repeated experience:

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. (*2)*

Professor Germaine Warkentin from the University of Toronto explains that the origins of this poem was described by Pratt himself. It emerged from the poet's experience of accompanying his father, who was a Methodist minister, on visits to inform families of the loss at sea of their husbands, brothers and sons.(*3)

This early contact with death accounts for Pratt's difficulty in adopting a Romantic attitude towards a landscape which he never experienced as

being a benevolent attendant on human emotions. For the Confederation poets nature was a mother, for Pratt it was often a murderess to whom he was, however, powerfully attracted. In a poem entitled "The Shark" Pratt describes the horrifying beauty and ferocious efficiency of one of the greatest killers of all the oceans. The shark is seen as a perfect mechanism which ultimately represents the menacing and uncaring nature of the Canadian wilderness:

His body was tubular
And tapered
And smoke-blue,
And as he passed the wharf
He turned,
And snapped at a flat fish
That was dead and floating.
And I saw the flash of a white throat,
And a double row of white teeth,
And eyes of metallic grey,
Hard and narrow and slit.

Then out of the harbor
(...)
He swam-
That strange fish,
Tubular, tapered, smoke-blue,
Part vulture, part wolf,
*Part neither - for his blood was cold.(*4)*

The differences between the poetry of E.J. Pratt and the writings of the Confederation

artists are evident in this poem. Pratt departs from their emotive Romantic diction and adopts the technical vocabulary of modern age to describe the animal with Imagist poignancy and precision. These characteristics illustrate Pratt's modern vein which is also seen in the poet's love of detail, his realism and his detachment from the action related.

Pratt's departure from Romantic canons with regard to his poetic style and vision of nature also becomes manifest in "The Titanic", a poem based on the loss of this famous liner in collision with an iceberg in 1912. Once again, Pratt depicts nature as a cold and threatening mechanism ruled by laws which have nothing to do with transcendence. The iceberg that sank the supposedly unsinkable ship on its maiden voyage is a mere accident of climate the poet describes with a mixture of scientific detachment and poetic fantasy:

> ***Calved from a glacier near Godhaven coast***
> ***(...)***
> ***Pressure and glacial time had stratified***
> ***The berg to the consistency of flint,***
> ***(...)***

The sun which left its crystal peaks aflame
(...)
Demolished the last temple touch of grace
(...)
And lying twenty feet below had made
It lurch and shamble like a plantigrade;
But with an impulse governed by the raw
Mechanics ot its birth, it drifted where
Ambushed, fog-gray, it stumbled on its lair,
North forty-one degrees and forty-four,
Fifty and fourteen west the longitude,
Waiting a world-memorial hour, its rude
*Corundum form shipped to its Greenland core. (*5)*

The same combination of realism and imagination is evident in "Towards the Last Spike", a long poem the subtitle of which appeared in the original edition of 1952 as:

*A Verse-Panorama of the Struggle to Build the first Canadian Transcontinental from the Time of the proposed Terms of Union with British Columbia (1870) to the hammering of the Last Spike in the Eagle Pass (1885).(*6)*

In this long narrative, Pratt gives a detailed and well-documented account of the parliamentary debates that took place before and during the building of the railway, and describes the unimaginable natural barriers the builders had to overcome before the driving in of the last

spike. He tells us that the prairies were relatively easy to conquer:

> *The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over,*
> *The black alluvial mould laid bare, the bed*
> *levelled and scraped. (*7)*

However, the Laurentian Shield and the Rockies were obstacles that 'put cramps in hands and feet/ Merely by the suggestion of the venture'.(*8) Pratt endows the mass of Precambrian rock along the north shore of Lake Superior with mythological status by likening it to a female dragon that had lain undisturbed for aeons 'snug' against another huge reptile representing the full extent of the Shield:

> *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 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 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*
> *Its head was hidden in the Arctic Seas.*
> *This folded reptile was asleep or dead;*
> *So motionless, she seemed stone dead - just seemed:*
> *She was too old for death, too old for life,*
> *For as if jealous of all living forms*