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Scientific Language in the Poetry of E.J. Pratt

WINIFRED M. MELLOR

> I came at last to realize that there was a great field of relatively unexplored soil ready for poetic handling, that is, the field of science. (Pratt, quoted in Djwa 64).

THE USE OF VOCABULARY from scientific discourse in E.J. Pratt's poetry serves to destabilize its moral humanist undertones by exhibiting humans as both included in and excluded from nature. Scientific language strains away from the often emotional or sentimental themes in Pratt's poetry which include the triumph of human will over natural elements, moral courage and self-sacrifice.

Glenn Clever notices Pratt's factual accuracy, saying his "imagery focuses on primitive nature, on evolutionary time and on power and its multi-faceted manifestations, studded with meticulously researched factual accuracy" (28). And Frank Davey shows, in "E.J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician," that "Pratt ... can be seen to stand outside rather than inside his poetic materials, shaping them through sensibility and intelligence, rationally confronting 'problems' of conventions, language and form" (30). For Davey, Pratt is interested only in knowable material reality (36), his diction reinforces a confident tone and his research imbues his diction with the certainties of "concrete detail and numeric exactitude" so that "he can appear to know his subject absolutely" (37). Davey argues that the "consistently enumerating" diction "helps the poet toward a tone of confidence and knowledgeability" (38) and that Pratt's technique of metaphor produces the effect of simplifying or rationalizing "the subject, to make it appear definable and comprehensible when it has been neither defined nor comprehended" (39). So while Pratt is a meticulous researcher and his facts may be accurate, he "has in fact substituted an interpretive rationalization in the place of the actual event" (41).

Sandra Djwa compares Pratt to Charles D.G. Roberts and notes that while both exhibit a fascination with Darwinian theory and Christian spirit (12), "where

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Roberts ... searched external nature for the 'secret' of 'beauty' or 'life,' Pratt turns inward to human pulse and nerve in an attempt to find the existential 'why' of human behaviour" (30). I propose that Pratt manifests this desire to look for answers within the "human pulse" by taking language and method from the world of science and putting it to work in the poetic realm. Pratt borrows language from an external source and transmutes it into a powerful tool for poetic discourse.

The paradox of the objective employed in the service of the subjective is central to Pratt's view of the human condition. Djwa contends, "It is clear that Pratt, like Eliot, found in science, especially in psychology and technology, objective correlatives for his own emotional response to the twentieth century" (143). I will look at: the purpose of Pratt's references to evolutionary theory in the poems "The Prize Cat" (1935) and "From Stone to Steel" (1932); the way in which a scientific experiment is parodied in *The Witches' Brew* (1925) to show the folly of positivism and to paint a picture of humanity as a unique combination of primeval savage and the possessor of moral will; and how scientific vocabulary works to buttress an argument for man's superiority over brute nature in "The Truant" (1942).

As many critics have pointed out, Pratt's formative years in Newfoundland gave him plenty of opportunities to witness the forces of nature at work on humankind. The poems *The Titanic* (1935), *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* (1930), "The Cachalot" (1925) and "The Ice Floes" (1922) tell of human life laid waste by the pitiless elements. Perhaps Pratt's fascination with technology is born out of a desire to see man's vulnerability in the face of merciless natural forces championed by the weapons afforded by science. With a love of science inspired by R.E. Holloway, a science master at the Methodist College in St. John's, Pratt came to see how an invention such as the radio could increase the chances for humanity to prevail against the daunting power of the sea.

In 1901, Marconi came to St. John's and "Holloway arranged for his class to visit the Colonial (Legislative) Building, where the young Italian was conducting his final tests" (Pitt 60). Pratt's "meeting with Marconi on the day before the inventor's history-making reception of a trans-Atlantic radio signal and the resulting elation that Pratt shared with so many others at the promise of no more disasters at sea, no more grief" (Beckman 16-17) is ironic because, as F.W. Watt says, "this poet does not equate evolution with inevitable progress" (141). Djwa suggests that Pratt's poems show that "despite scientific progress, man in his relationships with nature is still subject to the same demons which haunted his forefathers" (23). In *The Titanic* we witness human will interfering with the saving devices of technology: a potential rescue ship turns off its radio and cannot hear a distress call.

Impressed not only with applied science, which yields technology, Pratt was also intrigued with natural science and Darwin's work in *On the Origin of Species*. Hence, a fascination with evolution appears in many of his works. This attention to primordial beginnings both of man and material nature can be seen in "The Prize Cat."

Echoes of evolution run throughout the poem which posits Time as the agent of natural selection. The speaker muses on the domestication of the cat and "how Time had thinned / The jungle strains within the cells" (ll.9-10). As if the wildness of jungle cats is somehow in the blood that centuries of evolution have thinned to produce a tamer disposition, the speaker remarks: "What distance since those velvet pads / Departed from the leopard's track" (ll.7-8), as if this particular house cat was once a leopard in the wild. Pratt's speaker sees in this one domestic animal the whole history of its species: "I saw the generations pass" (l.13). Because of this connection, the speaker imagines the primitive wild cat whence this pet has descended exists somewhere inside the cat still: its leap is "furtive-wild" (l.17). The adjective "furtive" implies a domestic environment in which the cat knows itself to be a pet of its more powerful masters, rather than ruling in predatory bliss as the king of the jungle. In a domestic habitat, the cat's movements must be stealthy and secret, furtive, rather than strong, open, forthright, "wild" as befits its primitive ancestor.

The Abyssinian child the speaker thinks he hears in the whitethroat's cry suggests the cry of a child attacked by a leopard, the house cat's wild cousin. As Beckman, quoting Pratt, notes, this allusion "refers to Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia just before the Second World War" (18). If Mussolini is represented by the leopard and Ethiopia by the child, the existence of war becomes a manifestation of primitive savagery yet alive in modern-day humans. Djwa suggests that "the poem's technique of flashback to the primal past as an allegorical explanation of the modern predicament is a characteristic of Pratt's work as a whole" (15). Pratt also makes a connection between the ancestral form, the leopard, and the colour black — an Abyssinian child's dark skin — and the modern form, the house cat, with the colour white — the white throated bird. The initial five letters of Abyssinian, "abyss," also suggest the colour black.

It is a lucky coincidence that Pratt names Abyssinia in this poem since he could not have known that Ethiopia would be the site of the discovery of evidence of the earliest precursors to humans. Skeletal remains of *australopithecus afarensis*, nicknamed Lucy, approximately three million years old, were found at Hadar, Ethiopia, by Dr. Donald Johanson in 1974.[1] Regardless, Pratt infers that modern humans bear instincts similar to the tabby's murderous swipe at a bird.

"The Prize Cat" begs the question of how evolved humanity actually is. The use of extra-literary discourse here in the allusions to evolutionary theory points to the elusiveness of meaning and the frailty of all knowledge. The poem constantly refers back to a cat in the wild and draws connections to a present-day house cat catching a bird. Pratt draws this same link between modern man and his primitive ancestors in "From Stone to Steel." While the domestic tabby cat can be seen as the culmination of the evolution of cats, it is at once connected to (through blood lines) and separate from (in time) its ancestral forms, just as humans, too, are at one with and distinct from their primitive antecedents. As Dudek says, "Pratt's

concern with a naked power-urge as the substratum of nature, of man, and of the civilized life is only the antithesis of a moral and intellectual struggle" (92-3). While the cat is part of the larger world of raw nature and does not rise to the top over his fellow beings, humans, on the other hand, though part of nature, are aloof from it by virtue of their intelligence and their souls, and Djwa says that "Pratt implies ... throughout his work that human will must be an operative force in the cosmic struggle for survival, particularly when there is a danger that man will revert to his animal past" (18). Rhetorical devices in this poem create a response in the reader that mimics the unsettling predicament of humanity that is advanced in the theme, that humans are both powerful and helpless.

We meet a human reverting to his animal past in the character of Tom the Sea-cat in *The Witches' Brew*, and another one exercising free choice to reject his beholdenness to the mechanical universe in "The Truant." "From Stone to Steel" traces man's evolutionary history through the lens of technology and employs the flashback method which Djwa says illustrates Pratt's view of modern humans' situation.

"From Stone to Steel" traces the evolution of humanity, citing the progression of the materials it has used to make tools: "From stone to bronze, from bronze to steel" (l.1). While anthropoid forms prior to *homo erectus* (such as *australopithecus afarensis*) are not considered to be human, *homo erectus* shows firm evidence of the use of fire and a tool technology, and is considered to be human on this basis. Susan Beckman, in an article about how Pratt's poems evolve from first draft to final published version, says that "the evolution of expression is just one of the meanings underlying the highly suggestive phrase 'from Java to Geneva'" (6). I believe the word "Java" in line four refers to the site where a *homo erectus* skull and femur were unearthed in the banks of the Solo river on Java by Eugene Dubois in 1891. These artifacts from Java are estimated to be between 100,000 and 300,000 years old.

The inferred connections between primitive man and modern man emerge in every stanza of the poem. The Neanderthal mentioned in stanza two is a later form than *homo erectus*, believed to have existed from 30,000 to 75,000 years ago. It could certainly have evolved from *homo erectus* and here forms the link between primitive and modern humans since Neanderthal is considered *homo sapiens sapiens* while *homo erectus* is not.

The word "evolution" appears in the third stanza and makes overt the theme of the poem. In the same stanza reference is made to the Euphrates river, which, together with the Tigris river, forms the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, considered to be the birthplace of an agriculture-based civilization. The change from hunter-gatherer societies to settlements based on food production took place some 11,000 years ago. From the time of Neanderthal man the poem has moved forward several thousands of years.

"From Stone to Steel" takes us on an evolutionary journey, each stanza representing a different stage in the development of human beings. In the next stanza, temples and the practice of animal sacrifice suggest a New World civilization such as that of the Mayan empire which flourished from 1000 B.C. to about 830 A.D. Excavation of the ancient city of Tikal located in modern day Mexico reveals temples and evidence of a religion to which the inhabitants probably turned for guidance in agricultural matters.

From Solo man, 300,000 years ago, to Neanderthal man, 75,000 years ago, to early food production 11,000 years ago, to the New World a mere 3,000 years ago, this poem propels the reader forward on a dizzying flight to modernity. But in the final stanza the poem questions whether evolution has taken humankind forward or backward: "The road goes up, the road goes down" (l.17); whether man has evolved at all between the discovery of fire and the making of tools (*homo erectus*) and the Geneva convention of 1864, at which an agreement was signed outlining the rules for the wartime treatment of prisoners and the sick and wounded. The last line of the poem is ambivalent. It seems to assert that human sacrifice separates humans from lower life forms, both in its demonstration of humanity's free will and also in its brutality and barbarism. The allusion to the Christian story of the crucifixion of Jesus in the word "Gethsemane" points to the human ability to exercise free will and choose to die for one's beliefs, but it also points to humanity's unlimited capacity to visit atrocities upon itself. Other poems which treat these themes are *Brebeuf and His Brethren*, *The Titanic*, and *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe*. Religious belief in this poem is figured as a uniquely human enterprise but, coupled with the extensive allusions to primitive humans, also succeeds in showing man as a killer.

Jargon in Pratt's poetry draws the reader in, inspiring confidence in the reliability of the data, and at the same time the exclusionary nature of scientific vocabulary pushes the reader away by making him or her conscious of being outside the world in which that jargon is common currency. Each stanza of "From Stone to Steel" deals both with primitive and modern humans, focusing on their ability and desire to study themselves, and exemplifies humans as self-aware, self-conscious beings. As humanity objectively collects empirical data about its origins, it is also confronted repeatedly with the inescapable reality that it comprises only one small piece in the puzzle of human evolution. By flipping back and forth between our origins and our present day status in each stanza, using the flashback technique recognized by Djwa, and by the repetition of the words "Java" and "Geneva" in both the first and the final stanzas, Pratt's poem exhibits structurally that by returning to study our beginnings we also affirm that we are part of a larger process over which we have no control.[2]

By alluding to anthropological facts, Pratt gives this poem an objective clinical tone, and gives the voice of his speaker the sound of a detached observer. But in raising the question of human morality in the last line he forces the assumptions of

scientific inquiry to be confronted by the faith-driven, if problematic, assertions of religious doctrine. The evocation of evolutionary theory works to challenge religious creation theory and unseats the Christian underpinning of human superiority.

The Witches' Brew, called by Pratt himself an "extravaganza," and called by critics such things as: "rollicking comic epic" (Buitenhuis 2), "sheer jest" (Brown 5), "a piece of delicious nonsense" (Hurley 6), and "scientific-cum-theological-cum-literary farce" (Wilson 22), can be seen as a parody of a scientific experiment. Djwa says it is "exploration of the physiological and moral origins of the human race within the context of the 'latest' in scientific thought" (14). *The Witches' Brew* is a good example of how Pratt's use of scientific language works to give the impression that the narrative of the poem is grounded in facts, even when the whole premise is pure invention. He manipulates the structure of the poem to resemble a laboratory experiment in order to poke fun at the methodology and assumptions of scientific inquiry.

Three witches formulate a hypothesis and then test it out, hoping to discover "the true effect of alcohol / upon the cold aquatic mind" (ll.11-12). Louis Dudek suggests that Pratt, by the "cold aquatic mind," is referring to either the typical Canadian mind or possibly the mind of a Toronto academic (89). The use of the word "true" here is both tongue-in-cheek and sincere. Pratt appears to be mocking the positivist, empiricist mind that does not acknowledge the limits of epistemology. But he also seems to believe that material reality can be examined and understood through a systematic approach. The impersonal frame of the experiment, along with the repeated occurrences of scientific words, destabilizes the rollicking carefree mood of the fantasy while cleverly exposing the inherent frailties of language.

Aside from drawing on such traditions as the epic (in particular Milton), the Bible, and a Newfoundland folk ballad called "The Kelligrews Soiree" (Djwa 46), *The Witches' Brew* mimics certain scientific conventions. The structure of the poem can be loosely divided into the following: the abstract or introduction, the apparatus, the method, the variables, the observations, the results and the conclusion or summary.

The first section, the Introduction, includes up to line 96 and describes the purpose of the experiment, how it was conceived, and the essentials of the plan to get it under way. The next section, which I have labelled the Apparatus, starts with "Other Ingredients." It describes exactly what is put into the mixture to tempt the fish and is characterized by the epic catalogue and a great deal of specificity and detail. This section ends at line 184, where "Defensive Measures" begins and I have called this next portion the Method. Here we are introduced to Tom, the Sea-cat, who will be the guardian of the treasured alcoholic brew.

With "The Flight of the Immortals" at line 249, we enter the Variables. Satan and his cohorts are attracted by the aroma of the concoction and come racing up from Hell to investigate. They represent an unknown quantity that the witches did

not bargain for, but are dutifully recorded here anyway in the report. The hilarious list of the minor devils of Hell is included in this section as are the initial speculations of Satan and his cronies. The description of the cauldron in "The Midnight Revels as Observed by the Shades" and the near catastrophe enacted by the arrival of the Shades resembles beautifully a passage straight out of a science text book.

At line 343, the Shades start discussing the experiment as it is happening, and I have called this part Observations. This portion, the playful allusions to historical figures notwithstanding, is marked by scientific jargon and military vocabulary. It is in this section, also, that Satan tempts Tom the Sea-cat: "Try out upon this cat, the brew" (l.422).

Tom drinks and, starting at line 431, we enter into the Results. This section plays out a parody of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve and the loss of Paradise. Tom reverts to a vicious, violent, amoral beast and we get the reactions of the Shades once more. Scientific language is rife here and scientists of note are included: Sir Isaac Newton (ll.484-7), Benjamin Franklin (ll.496-9), and Euclid (ll.504-9).

The Conclusion of the experiment begins with "The Return of the Cat" and here we receive a report of Tom's state of mind as well as the state of his environment, a model, in miniature, of humans' ability to turn simultaneously out toward the world and in toward themselves. Tom's predicament resembles that of Adam and Eve after the fall and Pratt hints that Tom realizes he has brought it on himself: "The thing told heavily upon his nerve" (l.549). What is striking about this section is its abrupt lack of scientific exactitude and detail. The conclusion of a lab report should summarize the facts objectively and succinctly and draw cautious conclusions based on the results of the experiment. Pratt's summary of this experiment is riddled with subjective emotion: Tom is described as "surprised" (l.542), "bereft" (l.555), "sullen" (l.559), and "lonely" (l.572). By departing so thoroughly and suddenly from his previous scientific jargon and cool detached tone, Pratt appears to be mocking the presumptuousness of the scientific endeavour. He challenges the ability of science to produce satisfying conclusions, and indicates that all summaries are subjective whether they admit to it or not.

His shift from objective, scientific rhetoric to subjective, emotional discourse illustrates in language the transformation that Tom has undergone — the transition from cold-blooded to warm-blooded by virtue of his sinning: from "fish with cold blood no skill had trained / To warm arts of human sinning" (l.318); he "had somehow learned the ways of earth, / The need of air, the mystery / Of things warm-blooded, and of birth" (ll.466-8). Once again human morality (emotions, free will, sin) emerges as a marker of human superiority over the animal kingdom. The poem suggests that at some point in evolutionary history, after we moved from the sea to the land and became warm-blooded mammals, we acquired emotions and

free will. If Tom represents humankind, then we are the "mad brutes" (l.518) who destroy our fellow beings.

In the midst of this delightful comic potpourri, Pratt manages numerous references to evolution: "Cold-blooded things yet not marine, / and not of earth, but half-between" (ll.106-7) refers to the creatures who, at that crucial evolutionary moment, ventured out of the sea to land; he also mentions "Java" (l.129); and "Patagonian bogs" (l.142).

> It's not for us to understand
> How life on earth began to be
> How forms that lived within the sea
> Should leave the water for the land.
> (ll.204-7)

But Pratt obviously does wonder about "how life on earth began to be" (and later writes a long poem, "The Great Feud" (1926), that records the struggle between creatures of the land and sea over the strip of beach that lies between them).

Pratt's use of specificity and detail works to reinforce the parodic structure of an experiment. He tells the exact size of the cauldron:

> A thousand cubits in its height
> Its width a thousand breadths as spanned
> By the smith's gigantic hand,
> (ll.133-5)

the age of the wine ("almost four centuries old," l.55), the brands of liquor (ll.82-9), the exact source of the seafood used to spice up the brew (ll.113-20), the source of the titbits from mammals as well (ll.144-54) and the "Inventory of Hades" (ll.259-81). The description of the cauldron is meticulous, including how each fish can drink from it (ll.319-42). Pratt dabbles occasionally in the technical, such as when he uses biological terms (ll.26-142), and when he includes such unusual words as "genus" (l.219), "phylacteries" (l.271), "delirium tremens" (l.364), "circumambient" (l.413), "cetacean" (l.474), "uxoricidal" (l.490), "caudal" (l.499) and "ignis fatuus" (l.502). These descriptions and terms, by their very presence in such a bizarre frolic, embody a curious fusion of the creative impulses in science and literature, once again drawing attention to the importance of the human will, but undercutting it at the same time by showing how language becomes transparent and emptied of meaning when taken out of context. This parody of a scientific experiment (Pratt even calls it an experiment at l.337) with its emotion-laden conclusion makes flagrant use of scientific diction to demonstrate that humans, try as they might to measure and examine themselves, can never do it objectively.

One wonders who is writing the report: certainly not the witches, not the Sea-cat, and not the Shades. In the narrator's absence from the action, the poem

plays out the impossibility of total objectivity: no one can at once take part in the witches' brew and be completely detached from it. The absence of the narrator also creates a hollowed-out centre which mirrors the effect of the inclusion of scientific language — the use of words unfamiliar to most readers creates a vacant space absent of meaning.

Watt asserts that "the wild, orgiastic exuberance of this poem, its zany verbal slapstick humour, and its explosions of innocuous comic-cartoon violence ... suggest a creativity temporarily released from ... sombre brooding on cosmic justice, morality and mortality" (135). The imaginative creativity of *The Witches' Brew* is itself evidence of a uniquely human capacity in its manipulation of language and the limits to which it can be taken. The creative impulse that drives both science and art, Pratt implies, is that which humanity requires in order to survive in and prevail over nature.

In Pratt's creation the truant we meet a valiant and courageous spokesperson for the creative impulse and undaunted human spirit. Upon hearing "The Truant" read, Northrop Frye wrote to A.J.M. Smith: "Ned has just read us his best poem yet" (Beckman 8). Robert Collins says: "in ... 'The Truant,' we come up against the one poem of Pratt that has seemed most to be his authentic voice expressing his mind about the way things have been managed in this universe in which we find ourselves" (171). The poem enacts the heroic flourish of the human will "revolting against the God of universal machinery" (Beckman 8). Watt says that "The Truant" is clear and firm "in its attempt to show what is quintessentially human. It is, simply, the great refusal of 'the little genus *homo*' to accept a place in evolution limited by and to the continuum of material nature" (141).

Pratt says it represents "man as talking back to a totalitarian God of power divorced from human considerations of kindness, equity and justice tempered by mercy" (Gingell 132). This poem celebrates human victory over brute nature and forms a contrast to those poems such as "The Ice Floes," *The Cachalot*, and *The Titanic* in which defeat, marked by the loss of human life, is paramount. Pratt says:

> The theme is the revolt of the human individual against tyrannical power. Man through evolution has become a truant from the original dance of the atoms. He has developed concepts, a will of his own, a moral sense and a spirit of adventure which refuses regimentation ... Everything of value which the universe possesses is created by man himself and ... this is part of human nature which survives death and the material universe. The free personality is something immeasurably greater than mere bulk and power and physical motion. (Gingell 132-3)

Man is victorious over the arbitrary oppression of Panjandrum, cosmic energy personified, because he possesses the capacity to name, to study, to conduct scientific investigation, and to create. He is self-conscious and self-aware; he can see himself as well as beyond himself — something that nothing else in nature can do.

Panjandrum proposes to examine "the little genus *homo*" (l.55) with a "cosmoscope" (l.46), which is a mechanical apparatus showing the relative position and motions of members of the solar system. The cosmoscope will allow him to look out into the universe, but it would not be suitable for analyzing such a little "biped, rational, six feet high / And two feet wide" (ll.9-10). Panjandrum, then, is limited to unidirectional vision; he lacks the self-awareness of humans. Man,

> That strange precipitate
> Which has the quality to resist
> Our oldest and most trusted catalyst
> (ll.36-8)

who is accused of

> Walking out with that defiant, free
> Toss of your head, banging the doors
> (ll.69-70)

answers Panjandrum, ironically, with silence:

> By answering with a flinchless stare
> The Awful Presence seated there.
> (ll.51-2)

His silence is ironic for man's mastery of language is one of the things which separates him from other animate life. When the tiny rational biped does speak up, he cites in his defense language ("You had no name" l.115), Maths ("arithmetic" l.109, "graphs" l.110, "integer" l.113), Euclidian geometry ("diameter" l.111, "line" l.112, "parabolas" l.113), physics ("motion, time and space" l.118, "wavelengths" l.174), astronomy ("Milky Way" l.122, "comets" l.123, "constellations" l.141), archaeology ("eolith" l.143), biology ("anatomize" l.151), emotions ("To you no pain nor joy nor love nor hate" l.165) and finally religion ("Galilean" l.189, "Rood" l.190) — thereby naming everything that is unique to humans. The truant Man has surpassed material nature in his ability to create stories, both scientific and mythic, about his existence. As Djwa explains, "instead of relying upon the natural process as the model for his eschatology, he turned a 'human page' and began to chart natural phenomenon and deduce scientific cause and effects" (118-9).

An image that works beautifully and appropriately in this poem is the "rain / Of dull Lucretian atoms crowding space" at ll.154-5. The truant taunts Panjandrum with this name-calling, but more than that, this image encapsulates the paradox of man's position both engulfed by and removed from the material cosmos. The atom,

then, is the perfect "bit of matter" to illustrate how humans can study themselves and yet cannot be objective about that study. The allusion to Lucretius is wonderful because Pratt's poem accomplishes, in a much more self-conscious way, a similar objective to the one that Lucretius must have aimed for when he wrote *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things). Titus Lucretius Carus lived between 98 and 55 B.C. *De rerum natura* is a didactic poem in six books, setting forth in outline a complete science of the universe. In the hopes of freeing man from the yoke of religious superstition and the fear of death, Lucretius intended to show that all things operate according to their own laws and are not influenced by supernatural powers. The poem was based on the philosophies of the atomists, Democritus and Epicurus; Lucretius died, however, by his own hand, before completing the final draft. Pratt, too, writes of things scientific in poetry. But he uses science in his poetry to theorize about the human condition, while Lucretius used poetry to theorize about science. And while Lucretius believed humanity and the world to be made of nothing but atoms, Pratt cites Lucretian atoms and calls them "dull," for he indicates that they fall short of explaining the entire complex that comprises human existence. The truant Pratt knows that humans consist of much more than just atoms. As F.W. Watt explains:

> To worship this mechanical authority would be to accept the evidence, persuasive as it may be, that man is after all basically the same as the natural elements out of which his body is made, the physical matter to which accident, abuse, torture, war, old age, or death will eventually reduce him, and to which the theories of science have in fact already reduced the deteriorating elemental universe. (141)

Man emerges triumphant through his creative power, and Pratt draws on some technical terminology to highlight science as one of the constructs of humankind. He says: "Some of the words in this poem I didn't know myself until I began searching for scientific terms in the unabridged dictionaries" (Beckman 7). Why would a poet go to all the trouble to find obscure and little-known scientific words to use in a poem? For Frank Davey, Pratt is like Panjandrum in that "in technique he regards his materials ... as things to be specified, counted or altered" (45). Panjandrum regards the tiny scrap of humanity in a similar way. Pratt shows that all human creative acts, whether they be scientific inquiry or linguistic expression, are affected and contrived. Humans create narratives to explain their world through scientific enterprise, through religious stories and beliefs, through poetry and art. The extra-literary rhetoric in this poem is employed playfully to celebrate humans as prolific word-makers. In the truant's exaltation of the joy of naming is the implicit contention that humans create meaning as well as words. Scientific words when utilized in science are taken to be transparent, to point directly to a referent that is known. But when these words are transplanted into poetic discourse they become language for the sake of language. Few readers would know their meanings without going to the dictionary and the result of seeing so many virtually meaning-

less words is to become aware of language as language, versus language as signifier. Having no referent to point to, these words become hollow, emptied of meaning and point only to themselves, and by extension to the highly self-conscious, literary, academic, writerly consciousness that decided to include them in a poem.

Words like "thaumaturge" (l.43 — meaning one who performs miracles), "coprophagite" (l.54 — meaning eater of dung), "sporozoan" (l.57 — meaning parasite), "troglodyte" (l.58 —meaning all of: caveman, hermit and anthropoid ape), and "carboniferous" (l.60 — a geological time in the palaeozoic, about 200 million years ago) are spoken by Panjandrum to intimidate the little *homo* biped, but ironically these words have been invented by the human himself — the only inhabitant of the universe who has the capability of naming. Pratt, like Panjandrum, borrows language that was meant for another application and enlists it in the service of his poetic purpose, and in so doing he succeeds in separating himself (and his poem) from the objects the language represents. While engaging the reader through a supposed explanation of natural phenomena, the poem creates distance by using unfamiliar words that alienate the reader. Scientific vocabulary is manipulated to give the appearance of truth and knowledge when it really functions to unseat these categories and focus attention on the creation of meaning and the human compunction to label and describe his or her environs.

This poem emphasizes humankind's materiality — "calcium, carbon phosphorous, vapour" (l.22) — but celebrates its defiance: the human "grins / Obscenely at your Royal bulletins" (ll.16-17), has "committed grave contempt of court" (l.50) with his "flinchless stare" (l.51), and "standing erect" (l.92) answers Panjandrum back with gusto. Djwa says,

> man becomes the measurer of the universe not only because of his courage, intelligence and will, but because he alone of all natural creatures has evolved the capacity for truancy — the ability to cut himself off from the cosmic process and affirm human love and brotherhood. (119)

The indomitable spirit of human bravery Pratt admires so much can be seen in the image of "a bucking truant with a stiff backbone" (l.3). The backbone refers to man's strength of spirit: his backbone allows him to stand up for himself rather than be a figurative spineless jellyfish. It also points to his materiality: he is made of flesh and bones, matter. The backbone suggests the evolutionary history of man in that, as theories of natural selection go, it was a trait selected for in terrestrial mammals.[3]

Panjandrum, the matter king of the universe, on the other hand, is more a puppet than a biped with a backbone: he is controlled by fate: "at some late / Slow number of your dance your sergeant-major Fate / ... will send / You reeling" (ll.170-3). Only humans are capable of the "adventure" (l.168) of truancy because they are free. Freedom of choice sets humans apart and curses them: the Master of

the Revels is quick to point out that "Nothing but their own kind can overturn them" (l.30). While the rest of the universe is controlled by that sergeant-major Fate, human beings alone can will their propagation or demise. Panjandrum's reaction to the truant shows that free will throws the proverbial monkey wrench into the scheme of the material universe: "You have fallen like a curse / Upon the mechanics of my Universe" (ll.72-3). And as Pratt shows in his adventure poems, human bravery in the face of nature "challenges [Panjandrum's] power to kill" (l.19).

"The Truant" may be the best example of a Pratt poem which illustrates the use of scientific language to mock the pretentious, self-aggrandizing spirit of the "pure" scientist, and give the impression of informed reportage while alienating the reader with its dry, technical incomprehensibility. It is a call to humanity to challenge the power of brute nature by exercising its will and by making creative choices, and cites the domain of science as just one avenue in which humans can launch adventurous truancy and assert their difference from material nature.

Pratt examines humans as self-aware, self-conscious beings and casts them playfully in the role of explorers in the field of science to show them as creators not only of labels and categories but of meaning itself. Language surfaces as the metaphor for all constructs that humanity has erected and stands in the foreground of the texts in order to be continually punctured and shot through with defects. The entering of vocabulary from scientific discourse into Pratt's poetry foregrounds assumptions about truth and knowledge and acts as a way of deferring meaning to cut against the texture of Christian humanist ideological preconceptions concerning human greatness.

Notes

[1]From an unpublished paper by W. M. Mellor entitled "Lucy," written in 1988 at the University of Toronto.

[2]Some of the anthropological information in this section comes from Nelson and Jurmain's *Introduction to Physical Anthropology*, 4th Edition, (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1988) and from Haviland's *Anthropology*, 4th Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

[3]This backbone image recurs in Pratt's poetry: e.g., the Old Salt in "Overheard in a Cove" (1923) says you lose your backbone with too much book-learning (l.181), and refers to the backbone of frogs in the study of the age of the earth (l.319).

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