

**A COMMENTARY ON THE
OPENING LINES OF E. J. PRATT'S
TOWARDS THE LAST SPIKE**

by
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E. J. Pratt's narrative poem *Towards The Last Spike* is modelled on the documentary. In this it is unlike either the dramatic *Titanic*, with its scenes of marine rhetoric and informal conversation interspersed with passages of objective description, or the Vergilian epic *Brébeuf And His Brethren*. *Towards The Last Spike* opens with a statement of theme, which is then illustrated by a succession of particular examples which the reader (aided by at least some half-remembered elementary school history: the poem relies on Canadian communal knowledge) must be willing to forge into a life-line of meaning.

The opening twelve lines of the poem give a general view of man's place in nature. The human predicament is unchanged: man is still, in the words of Pascal, "entre ces deux abîmes de l'infini et du néant."¹ However, man can now overcome his short-sighted unawareness of his predicament, for his means of measuring the "deux infinis" have improved. In addition, he now has the algebraic equation $E = MC^2$, the formula for the conversion of mass into energy that makes possible the atomic bomb with its fearful threat to finally "stop/ The stutters of our tongues."

The emphasis in the next fifty-one lines shifts to human activity, and in particular to the response of men in 19th century Canada to the challenge of bulding a nation. Pratt develops the images of transportation and communication to characterize this activity.

Transportation first:

As now, so then, blood kept its ancient colour,
And smoothly, roughly, paced its banks;²

¹Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, in Jacques Chevalier ed. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1954), 1106. Another of Pascal's thoughts might be relevant to a study of the theme of Pratt's "The Truant": "L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature; mais c'est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l'univers entier s'arme pour l'écraser: une vapeur, une goutte d'eau, suffit pour le tuer. Mais, quand l'univers l'écraserait, l'homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, puisqu'il sait qu'il meurt, et l'avantage que l'univers a sur lui, l'univers n'en sait rien." *Ibid.*, 1156-57.

²E. J. Pratt, *The Collected Poems*, Northrop Frye ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), 346.

Blood moves in the canal system of the arteries, transporting life. The digestive and circulatory systems are the economic bases of the body, manufacturing and transporting the energies of life. Energy is power, or when conscious, will. Communication, the other image, in man's body appears as the telegraphing nerves with their reports. Sounds and images, the raw materials, are translated into meanings, insight. Men, using technological power to serve their expanding vision, will in building a railway create the body of a nation.

The antagonists of this enterprise are both subjective, lack of will (sectionalism) and inadequate vision, and external, the heavy weight of time (the Laurentian Shield) and the vast intractability of matter (the Rocky mountains). After his opening lines with the general statement of theme and images, and a brief extravaganza on oats and scotsmen that burlesques the metaphors, Pratt proceeds to document some details on the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway: the opening debates and the temporary banishment of Sir John A. Macdonald, the defeat of Blake, the marshalling of the CPR directors, Van Horne's three-pronged attack on the inhospitable terrain, financial difficulties. This necessarily involves a good deal of historical detail. But, except in the awkward passages where Pratt tries to reinforce his theme of unity with sexual imagery — the lady of British Columbia — it is by the images of transportation and communication, working on various levels, that the general and the specific are cabled together. By these metaphors, "space and time/ Had found a junction" (364).

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