A Critical Appraisal of *The Parable of Puffsky* by E.J. Pratt: Mythic Convention and False Syllogism

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This paper proposes an examination of one short poem by E.J. Pratt, a poem that has yet to receive critical attention, though its study provides some illuminating revelations about the world-view which Pratt's poetry suggests. "The Parable of Puffsky,"[1] included by Pratt in his 1932 collection of poems entitled *Many Moods*, is a poem which Pratt included in later collections of his verse, including the early *Collected Poems* (1944) and the later *Collected Poems* (1958) edited by Northrop Frye. Previous to these publications Pratt had exercised, in one notable instance, editorial discretion regarding his work: early in his career, he destroyed the manuscript to a "philosophical-lyrical drama"[2] called *Clay* which had taken some two years to write. The incident affected Pratt deeply—he mentions it several times in his reminiscences—and served as a lesson in self-criticism:

> . . . but I did learn one lesson—to put a manuscript in a drawer for a few weeks or months before submitting it for publication. I began to realize that presenting a poem to a magazine immediately after writing was the same as displaying a day-old baby to the neighbours before the features took on colouring and formation. I discovered that neither editors nor neighbours react to a new-born prodigy in the same way as its parents.[3]

In light of Pratt's "discovery" that editorial restraint is laudable, it is somewhat surprising to discover that Pratt ever published a poem like "Puffsky," which propagates racist stereotypes under the guise of an anti-materialist message, and that

he never withdrew "Puffsky" from any of the editions of his *Collected Poems*. However, the exclusion of "Puffsky" from Pratt's canon would have served only to delay the critical perception of unsettling trends and ideas which are manifest elsewhere within the canon. It is the purpose of this paper to describe some of the intellectual postures which Pratt assumes in his poetry through focus on "Puffsky" as exemplary of these postures. It is not my intent to take "Puffsky" as discrediting Pratt's entire body of work, but rather to use the poem as an example of limitations and weaknesses inherent in Pratt's writings.

The poem is representative of conceptual and ideological inclinations in Pratt's poetry, despite its marginal position in the context of the narrative poems which have received so much critical attention. If post-structuralist criticism has changed anything, it is the awareness of the significance of the marginal as a factor in critical interpretation. As such, "Puffsky" is a poem which must be addressed in terms of contemporary critical attitudes, if only for its subject matter and implications. The poem makes use of a subtly racist ideology which has significant implications for how we understand the work of a "great" Canadian poet. To ignore the poem's ideological position is to take a critically dysfunctional approach to the study of Pratt's writings. The reading of the poem which I wish to propose is subversive in that it undercuts the conventional and quasi-hagiographical understanding of an established poet. Despite the relative notions of *good* and *bad* poetry which are dependent on ever-changing normative conceptions, an awareness of offensive and injurious attitudes should always inform criticism—if only to alert the reader who is unaware of such attitudes.

The poem is both a parable and a portrait somewhat in the manner of Edgar Lee Masters. It is more specific in its anti-materialism than Yeat's attacks on Paudeen "fumbling in a greasy till," but not specific enough to warrant the charges of anti-semitism brought against T.S. Eliot for lines such as these:

> But this or such was Bleistein's way:
> A saggy bending of the knees

And elbows with the palms turned out,
  Chicago Semite Viennese.

A lustreless protrusive eye
  Stares from the protozoic slime
At a perspective of Canaletto.
  The smoky candle end of time

Declines. On the Rialto once.
  The rats are underneath the piles.
The jew is underneath the lot.[4]

Pratt chooses the parable form in which to frame the lesson he wishes to teach: "a short narrative presented so as to stress the tacit but detailed analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to us."[5] The associative and implicitly understood nature of the parable links its form with divine pronouncement: "the parable was one of Christ's favorite devices as a teacher."[6] As a result of this divine association, a powerful associative resonance is established in the titling of "Puffsky," which is echoed in the theological framework of the poem that follows (e.g., the good Lord, Satan, and Gehenna currency). That is, because of the parable's significance in Christ's teaching, the asseverations of the poem are imbued with the associative authority of Christ's theological, ethical and moral teachings, and, ultimately, of Scripture.

The title of the poem also provides the central image on which the poem depends for its effect. The protagonist is named Puffsky and there is much to be read into his name. The absence of a Christian name, much like Eliot's use of "Bleistein," would seem to imply a generic collectivity as well as possibly a specific individual. As such, Puffsky becomes a metonymic representation of the larger social group to which he belongs, whether that group be Eastern European, Jewish, or any other group that is stereotypically portrayed as having materialistic values opposed to the traditional Christian values which the poem promulgates. The choice of the name by Pratt is crucial in establishing that Puffsky lives in a domain exterior to the Christian domain which the poem implicitly validates; certainly, to have called the poem's

protagonist Nash or Smith or any other Anglo-Saxon name would have been to diminish the poem's overall tone and effect, based as they are on a critique of materialistic values held by people who are "other" than Christian. Hence the poem conforms to the predominant context of Pratt's writing from within an established value system rather than from without; that is, rather than challenging his own system and thus appearing to be outside the functioning of that system, Pratt is challenging from within the safe confines of his own value system the values held by "others" who are outside that system. The poem, then, manages to straddle the fine line between implicitly understood and stereotypical conventions that are now commonly called racist and equally generalized notions that validate anti-materialistic over materialistic values. It does so by virtue of its use of a protagonist whose name is neither specifically associated with a particular race (though Puffsky clearly does *not* belong within the context in which he is placed—neither heaven nor hell will accept him), nor specifically dissociated from the mythic conventions common throughout the English literary canon which have attributed certain races, such as Jews, with stereotypically negative values. The poem thus relays its message within an ambiguous context: on the one hand, it participates, however obliquely, in stereotypical and racist values, and, on the other hand, it affirms traditional Christian valuations against avarice and materialism in general.

The linguistic construction of Puffsky's name is itself meaningful and associative, based, as it is, on the morpheme "puff" followed by the affix "sky." The use of the morpheme "puff" suggests exhalation *not* inspiration and indeed, Puffsky's soul is characterized in the close of the poem as "gaseous," and therefore damned. The relative value of his soul is embodied in his nomination which also allegorizes his spiritual vacuity. The relation between Puffsky's name and his gaseous soul also contributes to the elements of the farcical and the parodic, which are evident in his depiction as a moral reprobate. Puffsky's soul is insubstantial, his name a farcical and parodic representation of that insubstantiality, and this element of farce is reinforced in the comic close of the poem in which Puffsky's value in hell is

deemed "Not worth a current damn." Like the character of Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,* Puffsky is a general stereotype of specific Christian perceptions of races that were commonly perceived as materialistic—the major difference between Puffsky and Shylock being that in the latter's case a specific sense of racial "otherness" is at work, whereas in Puffsky's case the sense of "otherness" is much more generalized. It is because this sense of "otherness" is allied, as has always been conventional in the English literary canon, with a negative morality that Puffsky, in Pratt's vision, is deemed a moral reprobate who deserves exclusion from all transcendent eschatological states, including hell.

A parable is expected to contain a moral purpose couched in the language of allegory. Allegorical representation, with its multiple levels of signification, involves a form of didacticism, a cultural encoding that evades overt expression of covert values, beliefs, or ideas. In "Puffsky," the range between explicit and implicit explication is attenuated somewhat by the diction of moral pronouncement which Pratt employs. Puffsky is characterized as not knowing "how to live" in the first line of the poem, and as not "worth a current damn" in the last line. This is hardly the subtle allegorical language of Edmund Spenser or John Bunyan, a factor in the poem's structure which suggests that the allegorical parable has been displaced somewhat by a more blatant parodic structure based on racial stereotype.

The prosody of the initial and terminal lines of the poem draws the reader into the poem and effects a powerful sense of *affirmative* closure, a closure in which the parable's morality is validated. That is, the nature of the parable as a form of instructive narrative is reinforced by the technical devices used by Pratt. Thus, the initial line is catalectic and trochaic, perhaps a prosodic correlative to the moral insufficiency and descent which Puffsky is about to experience:

> Puffsky knew not how to live,
> But only how to sell[7]

The prosody affirms and reinforces the declarative nature of the opening lines and is further strengthened by the lack of feminine rhymes; reiterated masculine rhymes lend considerably to the declarative nature of the text. Similarly, the terminal lines of the poem demonstrate a skilled prosody which strengthens the instructive and evaluative pronouncement with which the poem closes:

> Therefore in hell
> Not worth a current damn.

The inverted foot followed by the iambic foot in the penultimate line confirm Pratt's skill in drawing attention to the meter, and thus to the meaningful close of the poem. The last two lines are enjambed and the final line reverts to the decisive flow of iambic trimeter. The two final lines combined produce a line of iambic pentameter marked by an initial and arresting trochee. Their separation into lines of dimeter and trimeter heightens the subtle impact of the close. The perceived irregularity of the lines' meter masks the regularity of the final declarative pronouncement. The sense of closure is subtle—irregularity concealing regularity—yet vigorous and appropriate to the parable's purposeful didacticism, as well as to its parodic subversion of the protagonist. Thus, the prosody becomes both an enactment of the allegorical mode, characterized by hidden levels of signification, and a reinforcement of the parable's import.

Puffsky is characterized as a moral degenerate who does not know "how to live" but "only how to sell." He does not "give"—in the sense of social and economic participation—and does not even "buy," and thus excludes himself, morally, from the conventional society in which Pratt's poem is set. The initial anomaly which Pratt creates is that a man of commerce can sell without buying; the normal laws of economic function are set aside in the poem so as not to undermine the false syllogism that Pratt is working toward. Puffsky is accused of finding "such means to multiply / His wealth" while "never [parting] with a dime," the inference being that he is aided by preternatural forces. Strangely enough, neither the "good Lord" nor Satan, later in the

poem, recognizes Puffsky as a accomplice to their respective spheres of influence. The Lord sees Puffsky as a *parvenu* while Satan is "Amazed that such a spirit could exist."

Further logical anomalies, in the form of hyperboles, mar the poem. The use of hyperbole, itself a rhetorical device that plays with logical and semantic limits, helps establish the poem's parodic characterization of Puffsky as a money-grubbing immoralist. Puffsky is accused of being prepared to "sell his teeth" or "his eyes," both hyperbolic colloquialisms and clichés which are derived from the vernacular of racial stereotype. In the absence of any reference to usurious practice, the usual charge against Jews, we may posit that Pratt was attempting a more generalized moral devaluation of those who live outside the value system of Christians; such an absence, however, does not diminish the role of racial stereotype in the poem, the poem merely being a revisionary and more generalized critique of non-Christian values held by those (however vaguely "those" are defined) outside the poet's own privileged value system. This is where Pratt falls into the mythic and stereotypical conventions that, ultimately, vitiate the poem's moral order: it is much easier to criticize those who are different than it is to criticize those who are the same. Thus, "Puffsky," as a poem, proposes a generally positive moral stance against materialistic behaviour, while simultaneously conforming to a conventional devaluation of "difference" that may, in itself, be perceived as immoral. The tension between the two stances marks in Pratt's poetry a tendency to facile cultural generalizations, perhaps generally characteristic of poets involved in constructing some form of national identity, as well as tendency to evade the deliberately self-critical points of view that distinguish independent from conformist thinking.

Puffsky sells anything ("Bottles, gases, oils or foods") to fellows who take the "goods," and is denigrated because of his behavior. The denigration of Puffsky is a function of both the glib diction and the use of false logical constructs which are reiterated *ad absurdum*. Puffsky is trapped by the colloquial and bathetic language in which he is described, and by the contrived argument

used to justify his exclusion from heaven and hell. The lines of the first verse-paragraph, when examined with attention to logical detail, yield nonsensical falsehoods masked as undeniable truisms: "He found such means to multiply / His wealth yet never parted with a dime." These lines are ludicrously hyperbolic and serve to support the mixed tone of the poem, a tone characterized by elements of allegory, parody, Christian morality, farce, and the conventions of racial stereotype. The regular, uninterrupted iambic flow, in which the rhyme scheme has been *abba*, suddenly shifts to the more obvious heroic couplet in the third quatrain of the first verse-paragraph. The language is at once colloquial and hyperbolic, prosaic and patronizing—and is therefore denigrating to Puffsky:

> He sold by night, he sold by day,
> Sold long, sold short, sold anyway;
> He'd sell his teeth, he'd sell his eyes: it made
> No difference to his trade

Pratt suggests that there is a logical connection between obsessive materialism (or avarice) and moral weakness. However, Pratt's suggestion itself contravenes a traditional Christian moral valuation that economic success may be a sign of moral election. The poem devaluates materialism practiced by outsiders while never really addressing the problem of materialism practiced by those who participate in the Christian moral system, a system in which material success is often seen as having a direct correspondence with moral virtue. The problem, then, is that the poem gives the appearance of suggesting that for "outsiders" like Puffsky materialism is immoral, while evading the perhaps more pertinent question of why economic success is seen as a form of moral election by "insiders." Thus, in his rhetorical and syntactical formulations, Pratt creates poetic situations in which the unwitting reader is subsumed by a series of questionable cultural values, supported by false syllogisms:

> The other fellow took the goods,
> *But* Puffsky took the gold
> [my emphasis]

In this example, the connective conjunction generates a qualitative difference between the anonymous consumer of merchandise and Puffsky's appropriation of gold. Puffsky is guilty of moral weakness, in the poem's estimation, because of a *mythical* separation—indicated by the "But"—which exists between his world of commerce and the normal world of commerce. The antithesis between the "other" and Puffsky emphasizes a distinction between "goods," with an obvious pun, as things that have inherent value, and "gold," which has an attributed or specious value. Moral value resides in the "other" who receives "good," while Puffsky, as recipient of the gold, is censured, a situation that is intrinsically unjust and illogical.

One is bound to further undercut the poem's logic by asking how the "other" came by *his* gold? The qualitative distinction which Pratt seems to be making is one in which *selling* becomes a censorious form of *doing*, and especially censorious if the selling is unaccompanied by the relative business practice of *buying*. the assumption is based on the logical absurdity that one can sell without buying or giving, and that there are aspects of commercial activity which are more deserving of moral approbration than others. The reader must assume that Puffsky functions within the standard social and commercial contexts because his transactions are with members of the social hierarchy who are condoned by the poem. The myth that Pratt establishes—based on the logical anomalies discussed previously—is that Puffsky is morally deficient because he is *perceived* to not be "giving," when, in fact, the conventional rules of commercial activity suggest that Puffsky's survival is dependent on his ability to give and take within the normal world of commerce. The mythic convention of the moral inadequacy of those who are commercially successful, because of conspiracy with supernatural forces or dealings which are mysteriously beyond conventional business practice, is enacted in Pratt's parable. What is especially objectionable is the complete dismissal of Puffsky from any transcendent state, when, in fact, the evolutionary principles of Social Darwinism, which Pratt espouses elsewhere, would suggest that he have such a

place, albeit beneath the successful businessman who is also a charitable Christian.[8]

The poem is set in a visibly commercial world: Puffsky's selling, the Exchange floor of the good Lord's domain, and the commission which Satan appoints to evaluate the apparition of Puffsky. The setting is an allegorical and parodic representation of the social context in which Puffsky *should* operate and the divine context from which he is excluded, because he functions exterior to that social context. It is a world of hierarchy in which Puffsky is but a *parvenu*, and it is a world in which there is no place for Puffsky, and, by implication, for those who are like him. Puffsky is evaluated by Satan's laboratory for his worth in Gehenna currency. The evaluation is completed and it is devastating:

> And from the laboratory retort
> Came back this joint report—
> "Both size and weight
> Are indeterminate.
> It is a watered soul
> That hath a swollen diaphragm,
> Gaseous, but non-inflammable
> When mixed with coal,
> Therefore in hell
> Not worth a current damn.

Puffsky is condemned and yet the substantiation for his condemnation is minimal. He is morally inadequate, and his moral inadequacy is dependent on logical inconsistencies related to the basic rules of supply-demand economics. The parable purports to teach the value of giving, and if not giving, at least buying, within the world of socio-economic discourse. Puffsky, because he allegedly thrives outside of this commercial intercourse, becomes a "watered soul" not worth a damn in heaven or hell.

Ostensibly, the God of the poem is not the same God depicted in another of Pratt's quasi-theological poems, "The Truant." The great Panjandrum and "most forcibly acknowledged Lord" of the latter poem differs considerably from the waspish, if not dictatorial, characterization of God in "Puffsky":

> And whereupon the Lord adjusted well
> A glittering monocle,
> And said: "Hence—try the game in hell."
> So without further argument,
> Thither Puffsky went.

Puffsky exists beyond the periphery of the central ethos portrayed by Pratt in the poem. He may be able to attain the gold of the material world, yet this attainment is no better than dross in the extra-mundane world beyond death.

The moral and didactic element in the poem is thus a concentration of eschatological belief embroidered by the rhetoric of a fire-and-brimstone sermon. That is, Puffsky, through his supposed moral ineptitude, may never transcend himself in the afterlife, and thus becomes a lost and vaporous soul. This is the overt allegory, and yet there also exists an intimation of a darker and implicitly understood allegory—the allegory of racial difference. Such a charge is warranted, especially in a poem that functions through explicit allegorical images of racial, cultural, and moral difference placed within a parodic structure. Both racial stereotyping and evolutionary dogmatism are persistent features of Pratt's poetry, a reflection of Pratt's interest in generic man. Hence, Puffsky becomes a stereotypical racial "other" described from the unsettling and insidious viewpoint of mythic conventions regarding racial stereotype. Examples of such stereotyping abound throughout Pratt's work and some are listed below:

> Their souls had come to birth out of their
> racial myths . . .
> ("Dunkirk")

> Curiously Brébeuf revolved
> The facets of the Indian character.
> A fighting courage equal to the French—
> It could be lifted to crusading heights
> By a battle speech. Endurance was a code
> Among the braves, and impassivity . . .
> ("Brébeuf and His Brethern")

Oatmeal was in their blood and in their names.
Thrift was the title of their catechism.
("Towards the Last Spike")

But there were qualities which he
Derived not from the family tree.
("The Witches' Brew")

For all were pledged with teeth and claws,
To racial blood and comradeship,
Devoted to the national cause
And loyal to the boundary strip.
("The Great Feud")

Admittedly, such stereotyping is not always negative in Pratt, as in "Behind the Log" where the courage of German and Allied forces is paralleled: "Sailors above the sea, sailors below, / Drew equally upon a fund of courage." Similarly, in "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe," the heroic life-boat crew is endowed with generic human qualities:

The men answering the summons with a will,
Came aft; were picked for hardihood and skill.
Their names as on the shipping register:—
Robert Miller, the first officer,
Commanding, Ernest Heitman, bos'n's mate,
No relative; Uno Wertanen,
Master-at-arms, aged twenty-eight, a Fin,
His mother (Helsingfors), the next of kin;
Sam Fisher; Franelich, an Austrian;
Bauer, a naturalized American;
Maurice Jacobowitz of New York State;
And a Dane named Alexander Fugelsang—
Made up the life-boat complement of eight.

John Sutherland has noted that Pratt "celebrates the virtues of courage, of persistence, of loyalty, and of self-sacrifice . . . these are, of course the virtues which enter into the mould of heroic vision."[9] Puffsky is not a positive expression of these values but an embodiment of negative human characteristics and hence an anti-hero. He is an antinomian in Pratt's judgement because he is *judged* as such, *not* because he *chooses* to be. In

other words, he is opposed to the moral order because he is judged to be opposed to that order, and therefore lies outside its circumscription. Puffsky is a tragic figure because the moral order which judges him is a calculated determination made by the dominant social group of which Pratt forms a part. He has a limited freedom of will and the bounds of his essential spiritual freedom are limited, if not annihilated, by the society in which he lives. The Berkelian precept *Essi est percipu* is enacted here; Puffsky is perceived to be spiritually worthless and therefore *is* spiritually worthless. It is the confirmation of this worthlessness that is Puffsky's tragedy and Pratt's failure, especially if Puffsky is in fact a stereotypical figure representative of racial otherness.

F.R. Scott has accused Pratt of heroic oversight in the poem "Towards the Last Spike": "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?" Northrop Frye, in the introduction to the edition of *The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt,* has legitimized Pratt's tendency to focus wholeheartedly on the major social forces at work in his poems: "The reader will notice that Pratt's moral standards have few surprises: he is much more of a spokesman than a critic of public opinion and generally accepted social reactions."[10] As a critical comment this is true and is evident throughout Pratt's corpus. However, later Frye states:

> It is consistent with his interest in evolving life that the poet should admire size, health, strength and energy. His sympathies are normally on the side of "The Big Fellow." "Breed" is a favourite word of his: it has no racial connotations, but means that the poet likes things to be fully developed examples of what they are.[11]

The problem with "Puffsky" is that, regardless of Pratt's liking "things to be fully developed examples of what they are," an attitude that leaves little room for the marginal, the disadvantaged, or the social outcast, there exists a distinct notion of racial distinctiveness allied with moral failing in the poem. Poetic usage and diction have an existence separate from the poet's conception of how both operate within a poem. Hence, though Pratt may be innocent of racial connotations in his poetry, and though he may very well have been horrified to learn of any such connotations,

they exist separate from his original and unknown intention of how the poems are to be perceived.

This critical observation has been echoed by both Fred Cogswell[12] and Glenn Clever. In his essay, "Pratt as War Poet," Clever argues that Pratt creates a mythic and anachronistic moral order:

> *Brébeuf*, more clearly a war poem, with battles of faith as well as life, is yet more ambiguous. Here Pratt with ringing voice takes definite sides on behalf of the Jesuits against the Iroquois, establishing a moral order based on the myth that conversion to Christianity is a good, that it is part of the progress of civilization, and that setbacks to it are an evil, a regression toward chaos, a myth likely moribund today if not dead to most of the world's population. The poem is thus essentially verse propaganda.[13]

In terms of Clever's observations, "Puffsky" may also be seen as a form of verse propaganda based on the primary mythic convention which animates the poem: that success in commerce is an indicator of moral degeneracy among those outside the poet's own moral order.

Clever also states that Pratt is guilty of "narrative impropriety," that is, "a melodrama and sentimentality which preclude the development of the tragic potential inherent in the context of the story material."[14] He concludes that "When the moral order rests on decaying myth, or a myth inadequately sustained by the details of the poem, he [Pratt] is less successful."[15] In "Puffsky," the moral order is mythic when placed within the context of contemporary and enlightened civilization. The image of the "money-grubbing foreigner" is *not* acceptable as it was once in the early decades of this century, and this bespeaks an enlightenment and awareness in modern criticism. It is ironic to note that an image, which in Pratt's time would have been widely recognized and acceptable, is no longer so. The irony lies in the fact that what was once acceptable reinforces the poem, while, similarly, that which is no longer acceptable subverts it.

Frank Davey has noted that the abstractions in Pratt "show a mind convinced of the objective reality of classification and generalization, a belief important to a poet who also writes epic narratives."[16] This tendency to generalization is joined by the "*myth* of objectivity which possesses the impersonal lyricist" and "the *myth* of omniscience: the poet must appear to know the story in its absolute form."[17] Pratt was writing within these mythic conventions while also expressing the larger cultural myths for which he was spokesman. It is important, then, to analyze the sources of Pratt's myth-making and his consequent description of Puffsky's eschatological annihilation. The former originates in cultural mainstream thought, and perhaps in widespread cultural attitudes evident during and after the Depression, and the latter in Pratt's Biblical studies, particularly in his doctoral dissertation, *Studies in Pauline Eschatology*.

In Canada during the thirties, the anti-semitic myth as a particular form of zenophobia was particularly virulent. This form of racial stereotyping and prejudice has been effectively chronicled by Irving Abella and Harold Troper in *None Is Too Many*.

> Jewish quotas existed in various professions, universities, medical schools and industries. Jews were restricted from buying property in some areas, from holidaying at some resorts, from joining many private clubs or using their recreational facilities and even from sitting on boards of various charitable, educational, financial and business organizations. Anti-Jewish sentiments were being voiced regularly—and with impunity—by many respectable newspapers, politicians, businessmen and clergymen . . . There was even some violence as Jew and anti-Semite confronted one another on the streets of Toronto, Winnipeg and other Canadian cities . . . Anti-Semitism, he [the American Chargé d'affaires] added was increasingly "finding expression in private conversations."[18]

Even the University of Toronto, then the bastion of Canadian ivory-tower intellectualism and Pratt's stamping grounds, was not excluded from this racial bias and bigotry. Abella and Troper quote from Mackenzie King's diary dated February 20, 1946:

> I recall Goldwin Smith [University of Toronto philosopher] feeling so strongly about the Jews. He expressed it at one time as follows: that they are a poison in the veins of a community. Tom Eakin [past-principal of Knox College, University of Toronto], from whom I had a letter this morning has a similar feeling about them. I myself have never allowed that thought to be entertained for a moment or to have any feeling which would permit prejudice to develop, but I must say that the evidence is very strong, not against all Jews, which is quite wrong, as one cannot indict a race any more than one can a nation, but that in a large percentage of the race there are tendencies and trends which are dangerous indeed.[19]

Placed in this context, "Puffsky" becomes a natural expression, however general and vague, of the sentiments which were prevalent at the time. Frye's assessment of Pratt as a "spokesman" for "public opinion and generally accepted social reactions"[20] is demonstrated in Puffsky as a representative, if not archetype, of a general racial stereotype, though as stated earlier there is not enough evidence to suggest that Pratt was an anti-semite. Moreover it would be overly simplistic to suggest that Pratt's *personal* attitudes were racist, and a result of the thirties climate of anti-semitism. Pratt lobbied vigorously for Leon Edel at the University of Toronto, and one of his closest friends was a Toronto Jewish doctor. However, it is clear that as cultural spokesman as opposed to private citizen, his position on racial difference as threatening to collective cultural values was not too distant from Mackenzie King's, who finds evidence, not against all Jews, but against "a large percentage" in which subversive tendencies are apparent.

The culture and audience for which Pratt was writing contributed to the genesis of "Puffsky." However, traces of the ideas expressed in the poem may be found in Pratt's doctoral dissertation, *Studies in Pauline Eschatology* (1917), a theological study of St. Paul's doctrine of apocalyptic teachings. The dissertation does not provide evidence of racist thought on Pratt's part, but rather indicates sources of Pratt's eschatological conceptions which he modified in the conclusion to "Puffsky." Pratt's dissertation and the *Bible*, particularly chapter 18 of *Revelation*, seem to constitute the theological basis from which Puffsky's judgement is derived:

> The merchants of these things, which were made rich by her, shall stand afar off for the fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, And saying, Alas . . . For in one hour so great riches is come to nought.
> [*Revelation,* 18: 15-17]

The fifth chapter of Pratt's dissertation describes "Definite abodes of men, angels and demons [which] are represented in the divisions of Sheol, Paradise, the Abyss and Gehenna." In these abodes, "certain rewards and punishments are meted out to the good and bad . . . after the final judgement."[21] In "Puffsky," the eschatological climax of the poem finds the protagonist barred from any of the divisions of Sheol or the underworld. Later in his dissertation, Pratt states:

> That the judgement with its rewards and punishments was conditioned by the nature of the earthly life was indeed a Rabbinical notion, but it was conceived in the light of a ledger account or a scale of measurement, where good and evil deeds usually of a legal character were minutely balanced in the records kept by the angels in heaven.[22]

The irony is that a Rabbinical notion has been appropriated to condemn a stereotype that has strong associations with the Jewish race as it was commonly perceived by Canadians in the thirties. A further irony is that had Puffsky been judged by Rabbinical justice, his condemnation would have been almost as severe as Pratt's condemnation. The quotation neatly summarizes the thematic concerns displayed in "Puffsky." Good and evil can be measured, in Puffsky's case by "A chemist and a pessimist," and assigned a value in "Gehenna currency." Puffsky is judged in the same terms that dominated his approach to life—those of commerce and economics. It is a subtle irony that Pratt goes on in his dissertation to describe the terms of admission into the kingdom of God—in Pauline eschatology—as granted to those who demonstrate "Steadfastness in persecution and suffering."[23] Ironically, Puffsky represents a form of persecution and cultural exclusion but, in terms of the poem, is inadmissible to the

underworld because he is an embodiment of a form of social irresponsibility and therefore immorality.

Another relevant quotation from Pratt's dissertation discusses the nature of the eschatological aftermath of death:

> Apocalyptic speculation treated extensively this question [the nature of eschatology] and interpreted death for the wicked as their continued existence in some part of Sheol or Gehenna. It became "an eternal dying." "Yet shall be burned with torches the live-long day throughout the age." It is an "eternal punishment" conceived by some of the seers as a perpetual separation from God, as a "banishment from the face of the Lord of Spirits," or as the penalty of "not being remembered when the righteous are visited." The souls of the wicked are portrayed as being slain in Sheol, yet this slaying is paraphrased as an existence of intense wretchedness.[24]

"Puffsky" is a re-enactment of the death of the soul at Parousia, a death that is the ultimate form of finality because the soul is excluded from the transcendent states of heaven and hell. It is a terrifying message, and the terror is compounded by the implicitly understood racial imagery upon which the poem implicitly depends. The ironic distance between poet and protagonist is absent because the horror is purely intellectual, the prosaic tone of the poem suggesting anything but dread for Puffsky's absolute spiritual death. Pratt, through his study of St. Paul's eschatology, produces a personal eschatological vision that implies the impossibility of attaining to transcendence if one is like Puffsky; one's eschatological end is contingent, in other words, on behaviour, morals, and values within the accepted morality of social intercourse. Moral inadequacy leads to exclusion from the states of grace and disgrace which await all after death. The *explicit* morals of the parable are direct: conform to the social mores and norms of the majority; do not become removed from normal social intercourse; and if one benefits from Christian society, one must reciprocate its beneficence. The *implicit* morals suggest that to be generically *like* Puffsky is to be condemned to the annihilation of

the soul in the incorporeal neither world. However, these morals are predicated on the debased, unjust, and immoral cultural attitude of racial stereotype, on a moral code that is assumed to be equally valid for all, as well as on a logic that is intrinsically false.

In the final analysis, "Puffsky" mixes racial propaganda with Christian allegory and is a parodic characterization of avarice and materialism based on the mythic conventions of racial stereotype; as a parable it preaches a morality that is invalidated by the immoral precepts upon which it rests: that "others" who are different have no place in the hieratic worlds of the supernal, and that these "others" deserve this exclusion because they are commercially successful and uncharitable. Almost four hundred years previous to this, Christopher Marlowe's character, Ferneze, in *The Jew of Malta* (1633), voices precisely the same attitude upon which the racial stereotyping in Puffsky depends: "Excess of wealth is cause of covetousness: / And covetousness, O 'tis a monstrous sin."[25] In critical and moral terms, the didactic constructs of Christianity are legitimized by the message itself. However, it is the nature which the message assumes in its transmission that subverts the poem; that this message is couched in the language of the Christian moral parable or in parodic and stereotypical characterization of covetousness by one who remains "outside" the dominant social values which the poet privileges does not diminish its moral reprehensibility. The didacticism in "Puffsky" is theological sophistry: Christian morality based on the immorality of racial stereotype, no matter how generalized that stereotype is. (Here, the language of the Renaissance expresses the critical caveat which is useful in reading "Puffsky": "religion / Hides many mischiefs from suspicion.")[26]

Despite the possibility of Pratt's ingenuousness and the poem's ostensible moral purpose, it is a failed poem: the imagistic manipulation, the diction based on racial cant, and the false logical constructs work against the Christian morality proposed by Pratt. The morals and aesthetics which exist in "Puffsky" are culturally and philosophically representative of mainstream thought based on mythic cultural conventions, traditional literary conventions that

are racist, and the false syllogisms used to support those conventions. Ultimately, the poem's moral and aesthetic procedures are invalidated by Pratt's very use of these outworn mythic conventions. "Puffsky" is interesting only insofar as it sensitizes one to the moral inadequacy of poetic stances that avoid self-criticism or that are written from within longstanding and established systems of belief. In a perverse way, then, the poem succeeds because it performs such a function. To not be aware of the subtle encoding that the poem represents, however, is to participate in the very processes which weaken Pratt's more overt moral goal with regard to the transmission of anti-materialistic and Christian values. For this reason, a critical awareness of "Puffsky['s]" deficiencies may serve to improve the critical evaluation of Pratt's poetry and the moral, cultural, and philosophic premises which lie behind it.

NOTES

[1] Hereinafter referred to as "Puffsky."

[2] Susan Gingell, ed. *E.J. Pratt on His Life and Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983) 37.

[3] Gingell 27.

[4] T.S. Eliot, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 24.

[5] M.H. Abrams, ed., *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 4th ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1981) 6.

[6] Abrams 6.

[7] Northrop Frye, ed., *The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983). All Pratt poems are taken from the Frye edition.

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8 See Sandra Djwa, *E.J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1974) 10 and *passim.*

9 John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E.J. Pratt* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956) 4.

10 Frye xvii.

11 Frye xxi.

12 Fred Cogswell, in an examination of Pratt's literary reputation, has gone so far as to suggest that Pratt's canon may "be consigned to the stony limbo of that which was not for all time but for an age." See Cogswell's "E.J. Pratt's Literary Reputation," *Canadian Literature* 19 (1964): 8.

13 Glenn Clever, *On E.J. Pratt* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977) 55-56.

14 Clever 43.

15 Clever 61.

16 Frank Davey, *Surviving the Paraphrase* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press Ltd., 1983) 32.

17 Davey 33-34; emphases mine.

18 Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1983) 50-51.

19 Abella 228.

20 Frye xvii.

21 E.J. Pratt, *Studies in Pauline Eschatology* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1917) 69.

22 Pratt 94.

23 Pratt 95. This "steadfastness" was to become a central preoccupation in the narrative poem "Brébeuf and His Brethern."

24 Pratt 98.

25 Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta,* I, ii, 124-25, C.F. Brooke and N.B. Paradise, eds., *English Drama 1590-1642* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933).

26 Marlowe I, ii, 28-82.