The Civil Polish of the Horn: E. J. Pratt's "Brebeuf and his Brethren"

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> The snarl Neanderthal is worn
> Close to the smiling Aryan lips,
> The civil polish of the horn
> Gleams from our praying finger tips.
>
> E. J. Pratt
> "From Stone to Steel," 1932

IT is generally agreed that E. J. Pratt (1882-1964) is Canada's major poet and that *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940) his narrative of the Jesuit Mission to New France, is the most significant poem yet written in Canada. Beyond these generalizations, there is very little agreement among critics who discuss the poem; John Sutherland and Northrop Frye describe it as Christian epic but E. K. Brown, Carl F. Klinck and Henry G. Wells are content with the term heroic epic.[1] The view of the poem as an assertion of Christion Humanism is undercut by Vincent Sharman's recent assertion of Pratt's "atheism" and by the "reverent agnosticism" ascribed to Pratt by Peter Buitenhuis in his Introduction to the *Selected Poems*.[2] We might suspect that such opposite views of the same poem can only arise from an essential dichotomy within the work; a dichotomy perhaps linked to the distinction between the "heroic" and the "Christian" but one which is not to be easily reconciled by a comfortable observation regarding Pratt's fondness for muscular Christianity.

Although the muscular Christianity of a Kipling or a Henley can illuminate the harrowing torture scene which climaxes the poem, the real problem of the work seems to go far deeper. In essence, it appears to be the dichotomy between the supremely transcendent 17th century Christianity of Brébeuf, the poem's subject, and the human-centered, turn-of-the-century "New theology" of Pratt, the poem's maker. Or, to put this in other terms, the poem may dramatize a certain conflict in Pratt's own mind regarding the nature of the religious life and its motivations. Pratt originally trained as a minister in the United Church but he did not take up a pastorate when ordained; instead, he lectured at the University of Toronto, at first in psychology and then in English. Scattered comments from those who knew him and the evidence of the unpublished verse drama "Clay," (1917) written just as he was concluding his doctorate (in Pauline Eschatology) suggest that Pratt suffered a crisis in faith and came to the conclusion that he was not suited to the religious life. We might speculate that part of the appeal of the Brébeuf narrative may have been that it was the account of a man who did continue in the religious life; interestingly, in Pratt's *Brébeuf* the focus is very often upon motivation. Furthermore, the poem is dedicated to Pratt's father who was for many years a Methodist minister in Newfoundland. In this context, the poem may be seen not only as an exploration of the religious experience but also, perhaps, as Pratt's own apologia and vicarious offering to the father whose example he could not follow.

As previously suggested, the dichotomy in the poem seems to arise from Pratt's own perspective upon the action. An essentially religious man, at least in the sense that he accepts the mystic experience, he is in full sympathy with Brébeuf, 17th century mystic and Catholic saint; yet concurrently, as a former divinity student, experimental pschologist, and a student of Freud's disciple, Ernest Jones, Pratt is also impelled to present the great Jesuit from the 20th century perspective. This early modern perspective includes the historical Jesus of the United Church Divinity School at Toronto in 1910 (hence a tendency to explain miracle in terms of human psychology) a working knowledge of Frazer's *The Golden Bough,* and that vision of human personality which accepts Freudian sublimation and stresses those mixed motives which are a part of every man, including the saint (hence the emphasis on Brébeuf's "will" and implications that the Jesuits may pervert Christianity in the process of conversion). Despite these underlying implications, the surface narrative and the trimphant conclusion of the poem assert that Brébeuf's final sacrifice of self — regardless of motivation — is ultimately and magnificently justified by the establishment of Christianity in New France. The question which remains to be answered is whether or not these underlying implications seriously undercut the central religious narrative.

Our first impression of *Brébeuf and His Brethren* is that it is a magnificently structured Christian epic; the character of Brébeuf is effectively developed, the symbolic construction powerful and the narrative extremely well paced. The action is cyclic, beginning and ending with a cross, an altar and the renaissance of religious faith. Book I establishes the historical background of the Counter-Reformation and religious revival; "The story of the frontier like a saga/Sang through the cells and cloisters of the nation" calling Fathers Brébeuf, Massé and Charles Lalemant to the Jesuit mission of New France. In 1624, famine and the English blockade of Quebec force the Jesuits back to France; the interval of Book II is used to stress the spiritual zeal of the misionaries and to foreshadow Brébeuf's sacrifice on the altars of Huronia. In 1663, New France was restored and Book III establishes the initial confrontation of Christian "civilization" with Indian "savagery." Ironically, the Jesuits teach and the Hurons accept Christianity as a new and superior demonology. Centering on Brébeuf's famous letter to France ("You must sincerely love the savages/ As brothers ransomed by the blood of Christ"), Book III concludes with Brébeuf's vision of "the royal way of the Holy Cross."

The pivotal chapter of Pratt's epic is Book VI. Describing the fore-doomed mision to the Petuns and the Neutrals, "a labour which for faith/ And triumph of the spirit over failure/ Was unsurpassed in record of the mission," it establishes the almost unbridgeable polarities which lie between Indian and priest. The Jesuits, fired by religious zeal and symbolically the incarnation of the holy spirit, are viewed by the Indians as "demons" or "incarnated plague" whose baptizing ritual brings death. The inevitable conflict between the two is dramatized by Brébeuf's climactic vision of a "moving cross" advancing from the country of the Iroquois, "large enough to crucify us all."

The narrative steadily gains momentum in Book VII with the capture and torture of Father Jogues, and the martyrdoms of his French and Indian brethren. In a highly effective change of pace in Book IX, there is a brief moment of pastoral respite as the Fathers experience the "pipe-dream" of hope. But the narrative accelerates implacably in Book XI with the capture of Forts St. Ignace and St. Louis, and with them Fathers Brébeuf and Lalemant. Led back to St. Ignace and the stake, Brébeuf recalls the celebration of his last Mass and his final dedication to Christ; "Take ye and drink/ The chalice of my blood." Book XII chronicles the martyrdoms of Brébeuf and Lalemant. The poem concludes full circle with the return to the altar — to the 20th century celebration of Mass at the Martyr's Shrine at Huronia.

The symbols of the Catholic mass (the altar with its candles and cross, with host and wine) are adapted as the controlling symbols of the poem. The central concepts underlying these symbols are those of incarnation, the spirit of God in man, and transubstantiation, the religious symbolism of the mass in which the host and the wine are transmuted to the body and blood of Christ through the sacrifice of the priest. In the first few lines of the poem the metaphor of incarnation is developed; the winds of God as manifested in the "bugles" of the Counter-Reformation engender again the saints "incarnate." The vision of the frontier mision:

> . . . brought to earth the prophets and apostles
> Out of their static shrines in the stained glass.
> It caught the ear of Christ, reveined his hands
> And feet, bidding his marble saints to leave
> Their pedestals for chartless seas and coasts
> And the vast blunders of the forest glooms.[3] (245)

In this second metaphor, Christ's hands and feet are reveined with new blood by the Jesuit missionaries. Brébeuf, Jesuit soldier of God, is the incarnation of religious zeal ("Lion of limb and heart, he had entrenched the faith,/ Was like a triple palisade himself"). Through the vows of his order ,and in his office as priest he is identified with the sacrificial bread and wine of the mass: "I shall be broken before I break them." His identification with the way of the cross and the crucified Christ is made explicit in his first vision of Christ on the Via Dolorosa in Book I and elaborated in Book II at Rennes where Brébeuf recognizes that if he returns to New France there will be "broken altars/ And broken bodies of both Host and Priest." His vow to sacrifice body and blood: "As willingly as now I give this drop" indicates his choice; a choice which is confirmed by a revelation of "the royal way of the Holy Cross." His subsequent vow, "never to fail Thee in the grace/ Of martyrdom, if by Thy mercy, Thou/ Dost offer it to me," is a further step along the way of the cross which culminates in his final mass where, as priest officiating at the sacrifice, Brébeuf sacrfices his body and blood for that of Christ.

In the Mass, the altar candles symbolize Christ, "the victim of the flames"[4] and this association is also developed in Pratt's poem where Jesuit "fires" of zeal impel the Fathers toward their ultimate sacrifice. These fires of zeal are, in turn, contrasted with the barbaric torture fires of Huron and Iroquois; in effect, through each successive martyrdom, the priests transmute torture fire into sacrificial holocaust. This concept of sacrifice is dominant; almost every book of this epic centers about either a cross or a sanctuary, beginning with Brébeuf's initial vision at Bayeux of the crucified Christ and pivoting with his vision of the huge cross advancing towards Huronia. The poem climaxes with Brébeuf's martyrdom and a reference to the source of his faith: "the sound of invisible trumpets blowing/ Around two slabs of board, right-angled."

This emphasis upon the way of the cross was central to Pratt's initial vision of the poem. He first wrote the conclusion, the section describing the death of Brébeuf (which he confesed moved him more than anything else he ever wrote) and only then did he turn to the preceding chain of events which led Brébeuf to the stake. Pratt told E. K. Brown that the whole poem began with a search for "a simile for the Cross which would express alike shame and glory, something strongly vernacular set over against cultivated imagery and language. Two slabs of board — nails — Jewish hill, and so forth, contrasted with lilies, robes and so forth." As Brown aptly observes, this method of composition implies "the way of a poet for whom character is a symbol rather than a dramatic complex."[5] As a symbol, Brébeuf is clearly the embodiment of muscular Christianity and it might be not unfair to suggest that part of the "sport" of the poem is the extent of his endurance. Furthermore, the focus of the poem, centering as it does upon the steadfast "will" which enables him to endure, ultimately giving up his life for his belief, is not without some ambiguity in Pratt's presentation.

On one hand, "will" is seen as a desirable trait; channelled into "a life and a redemptive Death," it is that quality which ensures the transplanting of Christianity to New France. Prevented in their first attempt to reach Huronia and deserted in the wildernes by their Huron guides on a second try, the Fathers still reach their goal: "tattered, wasted with feet/ Bleeding — broken though not in will." Once in Huronia, there are the minor martyrdoms of stifling smoke in the lodges, cold, lack of sleep, hunger or inedible food, and continual harassment: "Uncovenanted fleas/ That fastened on the priestly flesh like hornets,/ Carving the curves of favour on the lips,/ Tailoring the man into the Jesuit coat." The narrative speculates if there could be a limit to the endurance, obedience, and self-control required by "the iron code of good Ignatius":

> How often did the hand go up to lower
> the flag? How often by some ringing order
> Was it arrested at the halliard touch?
> How often did Brébeuf seal up his ears
> When blows and insults woke ancestral fifes
> Within his brain, blood-cells, and viscera,
> Is not explicit in the written story. (259)

On the other hand, Jesuit will can carry implications of spiritual pride; Brébeuf's vow, "I shall be broken before I break them," in immediate context can suggest some hubris. In the larger context of the poem, the statement becomes an ironic *double-entendre* in which "them" can refer not only to his immediate vows but also to the Indians; Brébeuf's body is, in fact, broken before he "breaks" the Iroquois. In immediate context, his vows refer to his vocation as priest, as contained by the structures of his order:

> This is the end of man — *Deum laudet,*
> To seek and find the will of God, to act
> Upon it for the ordering of life,
> And for the soul's beatitude. (259)

But in contrast to Pratt's documentation of the spiritual humility of Jogues and Chaumont, Brébeuf is not ever presented as questioning his spiritual state. His initial vow of dedication to the way of the cross is not dependent upon the commands of his superiors (as is Chaumont's vow) nor does he ever appear to question (as does Jogues) the distinction between a martyrdom ordered by God's will and one which is the culmination of man's own desire. Captured by the Iroquois and expecting death, Joques is offered a providential ransom but delays "that he might seek/ Counsel of God and satisfy his conscience" for "How close to suicide/ Would be refusal?" Brébeuf, in contrast, celebrates his last mass without question although "he had known it was to be the last." The fact that Pratt does develop these contrasts in the narrative does suggest that he means his readers to consider them. Then too, Pratt's literal description of Brébeuf's last mass, although convincing and magnificently placed in the narrative, is not without a faint tinge of irony:

> *Graciously receive*
> *My life for His life as He gave His life*
> *For Mine . . .*
> *This is my body*
> *In like manner . . .*
> *Take ye and drink — the chalice of my blood.* (293)

The tone of this pasage is reverent, Brébeuf's words have the sanction of the litany of the mass, nonetheless on second reading we do feel somewhat uncomfortable with this passage. Perhaps, in the context of the poem's controlling metaphor of incarnation, it suggests too explicitly (verging almost to fertility myth) that Brébeuf has taken on the Godhead.

Furthermore, a tone verging on the satiric compels us to look closely at the manner in which Jesuit will is channelled into conversion. Although the mission to the Hurons is initially not successful, the Indians are captivated by the marvels of a corn mill, a magnet, a magnifying glass, and writing:

> . . . marvels on which the Fathers built
> A basis of persuasion, recognizing
> The potency of awe for natures nurtured
> On charms and spells, invoking kindly spirits
> And exorcising demons. (256)

The Hurons soon convert the white men's God into Indian spirits and demons: an *"oki"* dwells in the clock and Jesuit magic can bring light from the darkness of the universe (the moon's eclipse). The Fathers pray for a release from drought "and the Bird of Thunder came with heavy rain,/ Released by nine masses at Saint Joseph." Because the Fathers encourage these "marvels," they take on the role of Arendiwans or Sorcerers to the Indians.

The ethics of Christianity prove most difficult to teach, but Father Garnier recognizes and manipulates the power of primitive fear by sending to France for religious pictures:

> . . . one
> Only of souls in bliss: of *âmes damnées*
> Many and various — the horned Satan,
> His mastiff jaws champing the head of Judas;
> the plummet fall of the unbaptized pursued
> By demons with their fiery forks; the lick
> of flames upon a naked Saracen; (266)

In this substitution of the fear of the devil for the Christian God of love, the Fathers not only take advantage of the superstitious "racial past" of the Indians, they enter into it themselves and lay themselves open to charges of black magic by the Indians as Brébeuf admits himself in his famous letter to France.

Pratt's many references to the documentary facts of *The Jesuit Relations* (the letter, the moon's eclipse, the religious pictures) may lead us to speculate that any supposed ambivalence in his characterization of the Jesuits and especially Brébeuf, may be inherent in his source material. This does seem to be partially the case but at the same time we must acknowledge that Pratt consciously chose and carefully arranged the material of his narrative. There are very few references to religious humility on the part of Brébeuf in the *Relations* furthermore, in the several additional sources from which Pratt developed his poem we do find a somewhat ironic perspective upon the Jesuit saint. Pelham Edgar first suggested to Pratt that the story of Brébeuf previously treated only in prose, might be a likely subject for a great Canadian epic. Edgar would have been familiar with prose accounts of the Jesuit mission because his own book, *The Romance of Canadian History* (1902), was edited from Francis Parkman's *The Jesuits in North America* (1867), in turn based upon *The Jesuit Relations*. Edgar particularly notes "the Titanic effort of will with which Brébeuf repressed all show of suffering," and he also captures Parkman's ironic perspective on the Jesuit saint:

"Extravagant as were the chimeras which fed the fires of his zeal, they were consistent with the soberest good sense on matters of practical bearing."[6]

In the composition of *Brébeuf and His Brethren,* Pratt seems to have moved from Parkman to the *Relations,* augmenting this information with a visit to Huronia (the Martyr's Shrine at Midland, Ontario) and with a study of Catholic liturgy and doctrine.[7] His perspective on the character of Brébeuf would appear to be an amalgam of Parkman's account with that of the *Relations* but both are contained within his own ironic vision of the human condition. Pratt presents the Jesuit martyr as a man of immense courage, stature, and religious zeal, the major heroic figure of Canadian history. Yet, because Pratt's subject in the larger sense is also man and not only St. Jean de Brébeuf, this view is tempered by implications of human weaknesses. In particular, there are slight suggestions that Pratt sees Brébeuf's temptation, like that of Eliot's Beckett, as the temptation "to do the right deed for the wrong reason." There are suggestions of psychological causation for the first vision and there are slight implications that *hubris* may enter into his desire for martyrdom. Yet, paradoxically, under all this, as Parkman firmly asserts, there lies the "solid nucleus of saint and hero."[8]

Francis Parkman, an eminent Victorian, performed the function of a Lytton Strachey to *The Jesuit Relations*. His books, especially *The Jesuits in North America,* are consistently informed by the ironic perspective which refuses to establish the expected paradigm of unenlightened savage and spiritual father; instead the persuasive moment of his prose is towards a recognition of the real kinship between Brébeuf and his Indian brethren. In the following passage he turns from a discussion of Indian magic (dream feasts and food rituals for the purpose of exorcising demons) to the baptismal rites of the Jesuits:

> Turning from the eccentricities of the "noble savage" to the zealots who were toiling, according to their lights,

> to snatch him from the clutch of Satan, we see the irrepressible Jesuits roaming from town to town in restless quest of subjects for baptism.[9] (184-185)

The parallel between Jesuit "vision" and Indian "dream," between Jesuit "baptism" and Indian "exorcism," is too striking to be ignored . Parkman's contemporary, the Canadian Abbé Casgrain, sharply criticizes this informing perspective: "The work of Mr. Parkman is a denial of religious belief. The author rejects the Protestant as well as the Catholic dogma: he is purely rationalistic."[10] Parkman is indeed a rationalist, yet he does affirm the validity of the faith to its Jesuit practitioners even while suggesting they were misguided. This attitude is explicit in his description of Brébeuf's vision of the great cross moving across Huronia:

> To explain such phenomena is the province of psychology, and not of history. Their occurrence is no matter of surprise, and it would be superfluous to doubt that they were recounted in good faith, and with a full belief in their reality.
>
> In these enthusiasts we shall find striking examples of one of the morbid forces of human nature; yet candour lets us do honor to what was genuine in them, — that principle of self-abnegation which is the life of true religion, and which is vital no less to the highest forms of heroism. (198-199)

On the whole, Pratt adapts from Parkman's account the equivocal play on the word "brethren" referring to Indian and Jesuit alike and to the ironic relation between the two. He follows Parkman's chronology quite consistently and the slight changes in historic event which he does make are clearly intended to tighten the narrative structure.. However, Pratt does add to the poem particular details and oblique narrative comment which would seem to relate to his own view of Brébeuf's character. Brébeuf's first vision at Bayeux is one such detail:

> And in Bayeux a neophyte while rapt
> In contemplation saw a bleeding form
> Falling beneath the instrument of death,
> Rising under the quickening of the thongs,
> Stumbling along the Via Dolorosa.
> No play upon the fancy was this scene,

of the historical Christ and stress the psychological rationale for miracle. Further, it does not deny to Brébeuf the sincerity of his belief, although it does, of course, indicate, as does William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience,* the significance of the human motivation in religious experience.

Pratt's use of his historical sources also suggest a stress on the human. Brébeuf, at prayer, is described as hearing a voice command:

> *Rise, Read!* — Opening the *Imitatio Christi,*
> His eyes "without design" fell on the chapter,
> *Concerning the royal way of the Holy Cross,*
> Which placed upon his spirit "a great peace."
> and the, day having come, he wrote his vow —
> "My God, my Saviour, I take from thy hand
> The cup of thy sufferings. I invoke thy name;
> I vow never to fail thee in the grace
> Of martyrdom, if by thy mercy, Thou
> Dost offer it to me. I bind myself,
> And when I have received the stroke of death,
> I will accept it from thy gracious hand
> With all pleasure and with joy in my heart;
> To thee my blood, my body and my life." (265)

The vow cited in *The Jesuit Relations* also contains a qualifying clause in which Brébeuf states that he will remain faithful to the vow of martyrdom "save only that . . . it might be to the interests of your glory to behave otherwise in the matter."[12] However, as Pratt omits this and as he does emphasize "without design," the passage is slightly slanted. Here, as in the earlier italicized reference to one picture "*only* of souls in bliss" as contrasted to many pictures of hell and *âmes damnées,* Pratt's irrepressible sense of irony is holding up the precise words of the text for our closer inspection and drawing our attention to the incongruities. This same irrepressible irony takes pleasure in the catalogue of the picturesque which accompanies the baptism of Peter (Tsiouendaentaha) and, passing over into the satiric, points out that some of the Hurons, proceeding from their religious primers (pictures of Hell), are confusing the ceremony of Baptism with that of the Last Judgement and hell-fires.

> But the Real Presence to the naked sense.
> The fingers of Brébeuf were at his breast,
> Closing and tightening on a crucifix,
> While voices spoke aloud unto his ear
> And to his heart — *per ignem et per aquam.*
> Forests and streams and trails thronged through his mind,
> The painted faces of the Iroquois . . . (245)

In this description, Pratt provides both the religious sanction for miracle ("the Real Presence to the naked sense") and slight implications of Freudian projection ("The fingers of Brébeuf were at his breast,/ Closing and tightening on a crucifix").[11] It might be objected that the meditation on the cross is an essential part of the Ignation exercises and need not be taken to imply psychological projection. This argument would undoubtedly be convincing if, in addition to this fact, there was a source for the Bayeux vision in *The Jesuit Relations* as there is, for example, for later vows. But, in fact, as there is no record for any vision at Bayeux, so we must conclude that this opening scene has been purposefully staged by Pratt, to set the scene as it were for the unfolding of Brébeuf's character. This particular scene appears to be a merging of Brébeuf's several visions of the cross (all in New France) with the continental locale and ironic perspective of Francis Parkman's description of the Paris vision of the young priest, Olier:

> He was praying in the ancient church of St. Germain des Prés, when . . . he thought he heard a voice from Heaven, saying that he was destined to be a light to the Gentiles. It is recorded as a mystic coincidence attending this miracle, that the choir was at that very time chanting the words, *Lumen ad revelationem Gentium;* and it seems to have occurred neither to Olier nor to his biographer, that, falling on the ear of the rapt worshipper, they might have unconsciously suggested the supposed revelation. (283)

In a much gentler manner than Parkman, Pratt seems to suggest that the realm of psychology might also be invoked in relation to Brébeuf's vision. This concern with psychological factors is not too surprising when we consider that Pratt's religious works, "Demonology" (1913) and *Pauline Eschatology* (1917) both emphasize the essential humanity

Despite this alternation of tone, an alternation less noticeable in the narrative flow than it is in retrospect, there is no denial of the faith or mystic experience which motivates the Jesuits:

> And often, when the body's strength was sapped
> By the day's toil and there were streaks of blood
> Inside the moccasins, when the last lodge
> Rejected them as lepers and the welts
> Hung on their shoulders, then the Fathers sought
> The balm that never failed. Under the stars,
> Along the incandescent avenue
> The visions trembled, tender, placid, pure. (272)

Pratt's sensitivity to the mystic experience is revealed in this cadence from Book VI. Through the device of placing two sets of alliterative consonants together, and by the progresion and modulation of vowel sounds within the even beat of the iambic pentameter, the line pulses and shimmers like the hallucinatory visions it describes.

Paradoxically, this acceptance of the mystic experience coincides in the narrative with the ironic perspective and with the habit of mind which always views the spiritual in relation to its human embodiment. The paradigm for the latter is perhaps a combination of the historical Jesus: "O Son of Man" as Pratt writes in "The Highway" with the Jesuit practice of vivifying or realizing the pasion of Christ. Yet because Pratt always displays the spiritual ideal in its human or incarnate form, it must also coincide with human weakness. Jesuit will is a case in point; on one hand it ensures the dissemination of the faith, on the other hand, it can be perverted. Similarly, the Indian warrior code has this same potential. Brébeuf's famous letter to France recruiting priests for the mision had argued that the "savages" were "brothers ransomed by the blood of Christ." Ironically, as the narrative indicates, there is very little difference between Indian and priest. The Indian converts more than equal the chivalric ideal of the Jesuits while Brébeuf's martyrdom is more than equal to the Iroquis warrior code. However, when watching the Hurons torture an Iroquois captive, Brébeuf recognizes that there is a distinction between animal and savage nature — the "reason" of the civilizing process which can be so easily perverted.

> He knew that when
> A winter pack of wolves brought down a stag
> There was no waste of time between the leap
> And the business clock upon the jugular.
> Such was the forthright honesty in death
> Among the brutes. They had not learned the sport
> Of dallying around the nerves to halt
> A quick despatch. A human art was torture,
> Where Reason crept into the veins, mixed tar
> With blood and brewed its own intoxicant. (261)

As he does in the lyric "Autopsy On a Sadist (After Lidice)" published shortly after *Brébeuf and His Brethren* on the subject of World War II, Pratt sees man's movement towards torture and murder as the civilized perversion of reason, a taint or "toxin" in the blood. In this sense, the moral heart of *Brébeuf and His Brethren* is to be found in the struggle between the "zeal," or spirit of God, in the blood of Brébeuf and his Jesuit and Indian brethren as it is opposed to the amoral "toxin" or "adulterate" of savage nature: whether this savage nature is manifested in the occasional primitive impulses of the Fathers or the torture fires of Huron and Iroquois. Like much of Pratt's earlier work, *Brébeuf* is an exposition of the evolution of human ethics.

In a schemata where Christ's sacrifice represents the peak of man's ethical evolution, the passion is of supreme importance. And, as Fred Cogswell and Peter Buitenhuis have recently remarked, much of the impact of Pratt's *Brébeuf* is to be found in the torture scenes.[13] For Pratt, the torture fires seem to represent the "trial" at which the strength of the spiritual ideal is tested against the strength of its adversary — savage nature. The emotional impact of the final scene arises not only from our recognition of the tooth and claw ferocity with which the Iroquois rend Brébeuf's body but also from the progression of Pratt's argument which records the monstrous "reason" of cruelty: "Where was the source of his strength . . . ?

In the hunch of his shoulders . . . ? In the thews of his thighs . . . ? Was it the blood . . . ?"

> They would draw it fresh from its fountain. Was it the heart?
> They dug for it, fought for the scrape in the way of the wolves. (296)

The sheer power of rhetoric and argument carries us along even as we are appalled by the action described. Ultimately, the poem maintains, the source of Brébeuf's strength is not to be found in its physical incarnation — the body and blood — but in the historic sacrifice of which they are symbols:

> . . . in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing
> Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
> By Roman nails and hung an a Jewish hill. (297)

Brébeuf's pasion, in context, becomes a final transsubstantiation. In anthropological terms, the sacrifice of the mass is a civilized transformation or sublimation of human sacrifice, a connection which Pratt would have known from his early readings of Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*[14] Brébeuf's death struggles, presented by Pratt as a reversion to man's primal past (a "lion at bay" he answers his tormentors "roar for roar") is received by the Oroquois in much the same fashion as primitive man might have participated in the ritual death and dismemberment of the fertility god. Furthermore, Brébeuf's ritualized death (in terms of the Iroquis code) is described as having the same effect as the burial of Frazer's Hanged Man:

> Near to the ground where the cross broke under the hatchet,
> And went with it into the soil to come back at the turn
> Of the spade with the carbon and calcium char of the bodies,
> The shrines and altars are built anew; The *Aves*
> And prayers ascend, and the Holy Bread is broken. (298)

In effect, his blood fertilizes the soil for the rebirth of Christianity in New France. Yet the undercurrents of fertility myth are ultimately subsumed as they are historically, into the matrix of Christian belief; Brébeuf's sacrifice is in imitation of Christ's death and supports the Christian ideal. Ragueneau observes after the martyrdoms of Brébeuf and Lalemant: "all that torture/And death could do to the body was done. The Will/ And the cause in their triumph remained."

As the stoicism of these last lines indicate, Pratt had found in Brébeuf, soldier of God, a subject and action ideally suited to the heroic vision and dominantly martial energy of his poetry. In the simplest sense, Brébeuf is an amalgam of two of Pratt's earlier protagonists — an underlay of the giant powerful creature equipped with an unlimited capacity to endure together with an overlay of the Christ-like hero whose actions are governed by the ethical ideal. In this poem, as in Pratt's earlier work, the movement towards ethical action is associated with physiology (the impulse of the nerves translated into the human "will" which follows Christ's example); and the moral imperative becomes part of the inner world: "invisible trumpets" sounding within the moral consciousness of the Jesuit martyr. As ethical man, Brébeuf moves out from the particularity of his Catholic martyrdom to become the embodiment of the ethical ideal as it struggles against amoral nature. In a still larger sense, the poem written out of the background of the emerging World War II, is a parable of what Pratt saw as the struggle of the ethical sense against the cosmic immorality which he identified with the Nazi movement.

The problem still to be explored is our aesthetic response to the poem. If, in fact, there are ironic undercurrents to the narrative, why is it that *Brébeuf and His Brethren* still impresses us as a convincing religious poem? For some readers, notably Buitenhuis and Sharman, this has not been the case; but for the great majority, it is. My own strongest impression is that Pratt is true to the religious heart of the poem — the mystic experience — which is genuinely and finely presented. Because of this, because Brébeuf is universally known as a Christian martyr, and because of the dominantly reverent tone of the poem, Pratt has considerable latitude to be ironic and even satiric without upsetting the aesthetic mean. Within the stately matrix of the poem, small human foibles (or so they seem in passing), related in the ironic or satiric tone, are welcomed by the reader as amusing interludes breaking the urgency of the poem's movement towards the passion. In fact, this essay is an analysis of many of the elements which at first reading we tend to overlook, muted as they are by the sweep of the poem. Even if we do go back to read a second time and perceive that Pratt is pointing out similarities between will and *hubris,* between priest and Indian, and between religious sacrifice and fertility myth, we are still conscious that the religious justification is always dominant.

Looking back over the structure of the poem, we can see that here, as in the short lyric "From Stone to Steel" (1932), Pratt is working within an historical and ethical evolutionary framework which establishes the primitive cave, fertility myth and human savagery as one pole of human experience and the temple, Christianity and self-sacrifice as the other. The significance of Brébeuf's passion in context is that it is received by the Iroquois according to their primitive code of human sacrifice and by the Jesuits according to their Christian code. For both, the sacrifice embodies the ideal. In general, Pratt's Brébeuf, like the historical Jesus, is humanized and as such he is subject to the ironies of the human condition — including spiritual pride and regression — which inform Pratt's own view of man. The poem does provide a specifically Christian framework for Brébeuf's heroism, but as this framework is contained within Pratt's own vision of evolutionary ethics (in which the Christian ethic represents the pinnacle of human evolution), he is able to hold in suspension both the human focus and the Christian imperative.

The purpose of this focus upon the human and upon the evolution of man, of society, and of religion is to unify and generalize the epic: to move it out from its religious particularity of one man (or more accurately, one group of men) at one time to a paradigm of all ethical men at all times of crisis. Like T. S. Eliot in *Murder in The Cathedral* (1935) Pratt has invoked a hero from the national past whose actions are an example to the troubled present. The symbolism of Brébeuf as a figure of strength and virtue assaulted by savage hordes but courageously enduring to ultimate moral victory was not missed by a nation in the initial throes of World War II. Eliot had supplemented an essentially religious narrative with the psychology of Beckett's movement towards martyrdom in order to present Beckett as a man for the times: less overtly, Pratt added to the Brébeuf narrative suggestions of the psychological perspective and of a human-centered ethic. As we recall, Pratt began to write the poem with the ringing lines of climax, the image of the cross to which the omniscient narrator ascribes Brébeuf's strength: ". . . two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered/ By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish Hill." The cross, aggressively realized and placed within the context of human history ("Roman nails," "Jewish hill"), although it can be also taken as an example of the Jesuit practice of vivifying is, in my opinion, most suggestive of the concept of the crucifixion as an actual historical event which we find in Strauss' *Leben Jesu.* If indeed, the model for this cross was initially that of the historical Jesus, a dichotomy between the climax of the poem and the series of religious events which led the historical Brébeuf towards it, might be indicated.

Nonetheless, Pratt's selections from and additions to the original Brébeuf narrative were quite in accord with his own unified vision of evolutionary theology. Given this, it is reasonable to suppose that when he provides both a religious and a psychological motive for the same action, the reader is meant to accept both as parallel and not necessarily contradictory motivations. But not all readers can make this conceptual leap to Pratt's unified vision; for some, the very fact that there is an alternative divides the emotional response, opening up within the poem a serious dichotomy between Pratt's human-centered evolutionary ethics and the transcendent Christianity of his 17th century subject. Because of this, the poem, so convincing a religious epic when experienced as a whole, does reveal some ambiguity — when we attempt to focus on major scenes. Yet, as it is an exposition of Pratt's own vision of the religious life and of his admiration for the struggle of the dedicated man of faith, we understand why he dedicated the poem to his father. At the same time, Pratt's progressive but somewhat unorthodox "New theology" provides at least one indication that he would not have been well suited for the conventional United Church pulpit of 1917.

NOTES

[1] John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt* (Toronto, 1956); Northrop Frye, "Introduction," *Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1962); E. K. Brown, "E. J. Pratt," *On Canadian Poetry*, rev. ed. (Toronto, 1944); H. W. Wells and Carl F. Klinck, *Edwin J. Pratt: The Man and His Poetry* (Toronto, 1947).

[2] Vincent Sharman, "E. J. Pratt and Christianity," *Canadian Literature*, 19 (Winter, 1964); Peter Buitenhuis, "Introduction," *Selected Poems of E. J. Pratt* (Toronto, 1968).

[3] Citations from Pratt in my text are to *Collected Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto, 1962).

[4] Alixe Catherine Paisley, *"Epic Features of Brébeuf and His Brethren,"* unpublished MA Thesis, Assumption College, Windor, 1960.

[5] Brown, *op. cit.*, 155-56.

[6] Pelham Edgar, ed., *The Romance of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1902), 87.

[7] Paisley, *op. cit.*, ii.

[8] Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America* (Boston, 1963), 495.

[9] *Ibid.*, 184-85.

[10] *Ibid.*, iii-iv.

[11] As a Demonstrator in Psychology at the University of Toronto, Pratt would have been familiar with experiments in stimulus response, particularly in relation to Wilhelm Wundt's psychology. Wundt, like Freud, interpreted gesture as an indication of a will to action. There is also further evidence in *Brébeuf and His Brethren* that Pratt was aware of the Freudian implications of gesture as suppressed desire. The desire of the young braves of the Neutral Nation to kill the Jesuits is evidenced by gesture: "Convulsive hands were clutching/ At hatchet helves."

[12] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missions in New France, 1610, 1791, Vol. xxxiv (Cleveland, 1896), 167.

[13] Fred Cogswell, "E. J. Pratt's Literary Reputation," *Canadian Literature*, 19 (Winter, 1964), *op, cit.*, Buitenhuis.

[14] Pratt cites Frazer and fertility myth in "Demonology" and several verses from "Clay" later published in *Newfoundland Verse* (1923) contains a section "The Seed Must Die" patterned on the fertility myth structure.