

George Elliott Clarke. The Quest for a “National” Nationalism: E.J. Pratt’s Epic Ambition, “Race” Consciousness, and the Contradictions of Canadian Identity

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Volume 36, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092570ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092570ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fabijančić, T. (2021). Compte rendu de [George Elliott Clarke. The Quest for a “National” Nationalism: E.J. Pratt’s Epic Ambition, “Race” Consciousness, and the Contradictions of Canadian Identity]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 36(2), 312–316. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092570ar>

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BOOK REVIEWS

George Elliott Clarke. *The Quest for a “National” Nationalism: E.J. Pratt’s Epic Ambition, “Race” Consciousness, and the Contradictions of Canadian Identity*. St. John’s: Breakwater Books, 2018.
ISBN 978-1-55081-875-8

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the first Pratt Lecture at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1968, George Elliott Clarke spoke about E.J. Pratt’s epyllia *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940) and *Towards the Last Spike* (1952) in an effort to dismantle Pratt’s putative epic poetic ambitions. Although Breakwater Books’ promotional letter accompanying this slight but attractively packaged softcover declares Clarke’s essay a “heady and joyful renewal of the Pratt lecture as it enters its second half-century,” Clarke’s analysis of Pratt can be more accurately described, once you start peeling away the veneer of polished writing and the occasional parenthetical jokey interjection, as a hit piece deploying what has become a hegemonic tactic in literary studies over the last few decades, an all-too-predictable disconfirmation bias. The motto to which he seems committed is “seek for what ye shall *not* find.”

Clarke’s essay is divided into three chapters: “Pound and Frye,” “Pratt’s *Brébeuf*,” and “Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*.” In his first chapter, Clarke argues that, for “European-American” poet Ezra Pound, the “effective epic poem cannot focus on minorities — Acadian or Ojibway — or even utilize the miscellaneous speech of the variegated citizens of the United States of America. Heteroglossia, he sniffs, cannot provide the model for the epic” (Clarke 10). Similarly, argues Clarke, Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, who presented

the very first Pratt lecture in 1968, and against whom Clarke is clearly trying to position himself, seconds Pound by suggesting that the epic “is the voice of a civilization (or culture), the vocalization of a unity of cultural experience” (13). Frye, says Clarke, follows Pound by disparaging the provincial. Given the “existential limitations for Canadian poetry, its provincial and colonial inheritance, and its bifurcated national voice (French and English), it should be difficult for Canada to produce epic poets. But Frye elects one: E.J. Pratt; and one Pratt poem, namely, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*” (14). Frye, continues Clarke, despite his “arguably noble moral relativism” in reminding readers that the towering black figure at the stake is also a “terrifying devil to the savages” (14), nonetheless imposes the “standard reading of colonial history: Indigenous Canadians are doomed savages fated to endure as much justified annihilation as will — a few centuries on — the progenitors of Nazism” (14). He adds, “Clearly, both Pound and Frye assess twentieth-century epic as requiring an ethnocentric and/or nationalist poetic through which the epic poet appears as the vatic articulator of the dominant — or administering — ethnicity of a nation or imperial homeland” (15). Besides the second-hand basis for the title of national poet that Clarke assigns to Pratt, a more pressing issue for readers of the first chapter might be the use of Pound to cast Pratt’s writing in a negative light. Pound’s fascist, anti-Semitic ravings, mainly in his letters and radio addresses, are used as an implicit backdrop by Clarke to criticize the unitary, non-variegated qualities he sees in Pratt’s long poems; this, despite admitting in a buried footnote that Pound’s *Cantos* are “festively heteroglossic.” Clarke’s motive for using Pound isn’t based on expected criteria — a literary affiliation with Pratt, or a similarity of poetic subject matter, style, or philosophy (for example, there is no modernist “make it new” in Pratt). Instead, Clarke’s reason for inserting Pound into a conversation about Pratt, other than the fact both have written long poems and that they belong (along with Frye) to the same generation, is to sully Pratt ideologically. Frye, says Clarke, declares *Brébeuf* to be English Canada’s great epic because it represents European Christianity’s displacement

on Canadian soil of “Indigenous civilization, cast as regressive barbarism” (15). This is certainly an interpretation, but the question for readers is whether the text itself will fully support Clarke’s charge or rise up against it. A final observation about the first chapter: Clarke oddly inserts into his written text (one assumes he didn’t do so in his lecture) the parenthetical “*sic*” to point out Pound’s misspellings in his letters when he adopts a jocular (provincial?) voice, which is either an example of pedantic scholarly overreach by Clarke or a ‘colonialist,’ authoritarian (and thus hypocritical) corrective to wayward writing in its own right and ‘reparation’ for bad politics.

In the second chapter, “Pratt’s *Brébeuf*,” Clarke, following Sandra Djwa, “teases out” an implicit allegory that positions “the barbarians as prototype Nazis and the French martyrs as prototype Allies” (18) in that desperate period before 1940 when German victory in Europe seemed at hand. He goes on to argue that *Brébeuf* is not a serious attempt at a national epic because of the absence of multiple voices as suggested above, the absence of English Canada (the poem focuses on French Jesuits trying to ‘enlighten’ the Natives), and, of course, the negative depiction of Canada’s ‘savages.’ (Astute readers will notice the cover copy of Clarke’s book, which tells us that Pratt can never be the epic poet of the people in part because he is “unable to speak for Francophones”). Clarke claims the poem means to urge “liberal democratic Christians to confront Fascism in its German — and let’s add Italian and Japanese — formations” (19). He says francophone Québécois opposition to conscription in 1917 was behind the writing of the poem and that French-Canadian nationalism between 1920 and 1930 had absorbed a pro-Fascist, anti-Semitic element. Pratt, says Clarke, was prompted to muse on the link between Indigenous “savagery” and Fascist oratory due to the “allegorical *ménage à trois* conjoining Fascism, French-Canadian nationalism, and Indigenous militancy” (23). Here, Clarke speculates interestingly on the conditions that possibly contributed to the creation of *Brébeuf*. Clarke also, correctly, notes that some of the poem’s language ‘animalizes’ the Natives. Catholic priests see a “swarm/of [*sic*] hostile Iroquois” (a word, however, that also can

mean, more innocuously, “throng” or “multitude”). A better example is Pratt’s use of the word “infesting” to describe the Iroquois in the Canadian wilderness, “a verb that exiles them as outsiders and as disease, as cancers” (24). But then Clarke goes a little astray; he says descriptions of the Native mood as “hostile” “could be a nod to the persistent sabre-rattling, throughout the 1930s, of Hitler versus England, and Mussolini versus Ethiopia” (24). So keen is Clarke to persist with his allegorical angle that he ignores the text itself even when it addresses the hostility of the Indigenous. He leaves out Pratt’s acknowledgment of their suffering from hunger and disease, which they blame on the Europeans, as well as their suspicions about the frightening Black robes (“Did the Indian not behold/Death following hard upon the offered Host?”), a confluence of experiences that in part explains their dark mood. “On the second week the corn/Was low, a handful each a day. Sickness/Had struck the Huron.” Maybe Clarke ignores Pratt on the Indigenous because the Indigenous have become, in the particular brand of criticism Clarke is practising, a *category* useful for an ideological argument. He cites the text when it suits him, ignores it when it doesn’t. An unsavoury side of Clarke shows up when he says that “Caucasians do not need convincing that non-Caucasians are evil (or sinful)” (25), and when he reverts to a Pound-esque epistolary language he corrected earlier, writing that Pratt’s *Brébeuf* is “a paean to ye olde Christian missionary slaughter” (27). *Sic*. This mocking dismissal of the Iroquois torture of the missionaries is a low moment in his essay. Clarke gets more worked up about Pratt’s choice of verbs to describe the Iroquois murderers than he does about the act itself, an interpretive insistence that ignores the poem’s main purposes and achievements — its powerful story; its description of the nuanced relationship between Natives and Jesuits; its depiction of Brébeuf’s hubris, of his honourable (idealistic, foolhardy, suicidal?) single-mindedness grounded, yes, in his sense of Christian ‘superiority,’ of his courage. None of this matters to Clarke. If readers adopt his critical approach, then they too can wield the awesome power of abstract, moralistic, selective literary analysis and anachronism to justify the case that the Iroquois

who killed the missionaries ought to have been hauled off to the International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity. Ultimately, Clarke in this chapter performs a ‘tight-rope’ act in which he upholds supposedly enlightened liberal–progressive values of heteroglossia and provincialism, on the one hand, yet imposes an authoritarian ‘colonization’ of the text from outside itself, on the other.

Clarke’s final chapter, “Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*,” points out shortcomings in Pratt’s unexciting account of the planning and building of the Canadian Pacific Railway by bigshot Canadian politicians and industrialists. Pratt presents the Indigenous, whose lands were simply grabbed from them, as mere bystanders. Clarke also remarks that “Pratt’s Orientalism excretes, as it were, a discrete form of Yellow Peril. Pratt’s remedy for this racial panic is to bleach Chinese from the poem just as they are airbrushed, so to speak, from the historic photo of the last spike being driven” (41). Here, Clarke’s main interest in what is not there in Pratt’s poetry is persuasively hammered home with a single effective sentence. And yet he follows up this success by swooning over the “awesome industrialization” of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), by way of contrast to the mostly Scotch-Canadian industrialists who ignored their Chinese labourers, an industrialization process “that would accord the PRC the world’s largest economy by the 2020s” (46) but a process that only began in 1953, a year after *Towards* was published. For someone who has focused so intently on what is missing or what falls short in Pratt’s poetry, this elision of the human toll of Communist China’s industrialization is highly ironic, a racial stereotype of the essentialist Chinese character, a staggering leftist bias, and an inadvertent laugh-out-loud moment. As a colleague of mine said, maybe Clarke is a Communist anti-Canadian fifth columnist.

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