THE HUNTERS TWAIN

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An examination of the narrative background to Isabella Valancy Crawford's poems, The Dark Stag, The Lily Bed and The Canoe; from an unpublished manuscript, "Without, the West drew flaming gates across..."

For years since the publication in 1905 of I. V. Crawford's Collected Poems it has been held that Malcolm's Katie and Old Spookses' Pass were the chief examples of the poet's narrative style in verse. Her prose novels and short stories are now being collected and analysed, but their romantic Victorian style aimed at the "lady readers" of the Toronto Globe, Mail or Telegram in the 1880's would seem to have little bearing on the realistic lyricism found in Malcolm's Katie (subtitled though it was, "A Love Story").

Valancy, as she was known to her family, certainly suffered from a schizophrenic dilemma. On the one hand she was trying desperately to earn a modest living from her writing by assiduously catering to popular taste; on the other hand she was a young woman alone, without literary friends or critics, who was consumed by a fiery poetic imagination and intoxicated with language and metaphor. Doubtless through trial and error, mingled with some marketing success, she learned in her prose writing how to handle narrative style, characterization and plot; but these became, I would contend, simply the tools available whenever required, in whatever genre the poet was working. Quite another persona appeared when Crawford chose a looser form of documentary verse: the dimensions of time and space were added in the poem Malcolm's Katie. Whereas objectivity and aesthetic distance were the strengths of Old Spookses' Pass, in Malcolm's Katie the subjective feelings of the poet broke through the
objectivity of the narrative. The resulting bursts of song added another dimension to the poetry.

But would a critic be justified, I wonder, if he isolated these lyrics from the main body of the narrative? Crawford’s first editors after her death on February 12, 1887 were Mr. and Mrs. John Garvin of Toronto. In their 1905 Collected Poems they omitted quite a number of published poems, and several unpublished ones. Then in 1923 Mrs. Garvin (Katherine Hale) edited a Selected Poems for Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press, in which she “lifted” individual lyrics like “O Love Builds on the Azure Sea” from Malcolm’s Katie. Later anthologists have “lifted” “The Axe”. It seems to me that this practice is dubious. Part of the tension and charm of imaginative poetry resides in its relation to character, time, place. Thus, although Max’s song “The Axe” is a refreshingly natural, even Whitmanesque piece of poetry from the Confederation era, it takes on greater symbolic value from its position in the longer poem. This is equally true of other lyrics in which the characters Max and Katie burst out in true aria style. Crawford’s lyrics, I believe, were intended to be a part of the structural whole.

Indirect evidence of this kind of organization is now coming to light. In searching through the unpublished papers of Isabella Valancy Crawford at Douglas Library, Queen’s University, I have found a curious long poem parallel to Malcolm’s Katie. Lyrics by Crawford which have been considered her best, and which have been the subject of considerable speculation and interpretation, are in reality part of this long narrative-philosophical poem, beginning “Without, the West drew flaming gates”, which, as it lacks a title, I have called The Hunters Twain.

The protagonists in The Hunters Twain manuscript are Hugh and Ion, “my masters twain” of “Said the Canoe”. As was the case in Malcolm’s Katie we are presented with two young men of very different backgrounds. Hugh, who is part-Indian, part Anglo-Saxon, may be compared to Max, the Scot; both are men of action who possess the gift of song. In The Hunters Twain Ion is an exile, an intellectual of a similar type to Alfred in Malcolm’s Katie. But he is not in any way sinister, or a villain. His name brings up connotations of the Attic myth concerning Ion, abandoned by his mother and rescued by Apollo. Eventually Ion becomes king of Athens. Crawford’s Ion is an artist who wants to find for himself “a little Athens” where he may paint to his heart’s content and heal himself of a disastrous love affair. Whereas in Malcolm’s Katie the organizing principle is Narration and the theme is the power of Love, in The Hunters
Twain the organizing principle is Time and the theme is Hope versus despair (symbolizing pioneer optimism versus sophisticated pessimism or cynicism).

The manuscript begins then with that theme which will recur again and again. Here are the opening lines:

Without, the West drew flaming gates across
The grey, gaunt distance of the wintry street;
Low down were welded fast against the sky
Dull, purple bars that held the first fine snow.
Lower, the old inutterable prayer
That glows in golden script behind the day
Stretched its still strength about the darkening world
And as a cobweb delicately spun
Her black thin boughs hung orbed against the sky;
And in their subtle lacings seemed to cling
Arachne-like, the round, full Evening Star.

Dark on near hills the primal forest heaved
Its haughty heart against the City's claws
That lengthened towards its ramparts day by day;
Dark on near sands the tideless waters stood
Meek with dun, moaning mist against wan wharves
Dying to dumbness as the fierce young frost
Gazed on the shuddering world, ere serpent wise
He coiled chill crystal folds about its breast.

A description of Toronto in 1876? It would seem likely. This was the city to which Mrs. Crawford and her two surviving daughters came after the death of Dr. Crawford in Peterborough. They lived in rooms above a store in John Street; and though the city could scarcely have been so grim, with "heaving drains" as Crawford describes it in this poem, it must have seemed much more forbidding than the market town of Peterborough. Would she have read Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night", which was first published in 1874? In any event, after the wintry description of the opening lines the leading theme is introduced:

On such an eve despair is no strange growth,
But a chief vein that feeds the chilling heart,
With pausing billows stiffening as they burst
And Hope an alien flame fallen from the wick
Of a cold lamp that chills the failing hand.
Dust, sharp as spearpoints on the rising frost
Whirled in keen simooms, and, sullen orbs,
The base stars of the city lamps leaped up.
This is the setting from which both Hugh and Ion hope to flee, once the winter is over. But before we are introduced to these two “heroes” there is inserted in the text yet another poem! It is also written in blank verse, and is concerned with the loss of love (Ion’s dilemma). It begins obscurely and continues erratically, even chaotically, as if written by someone in a disoriented state:

Where’s speech in anguish? O she never throve
On the high swell of sorrow’s bursting heart.
Two groans are hers that give themselves to speech:
“God, God!” With this she wails him up before
Her bar of desolation, then, “Why? Why?”

A dialogue ensues between Sorrow and a disdained lover. She tells him a fable to prove that he is caught in a mirage, a “phantom little cross of love”. His reply is: “Away with Love, away! And give us up Barrabas.” From here on the poem dwells on the theme of “Barrabas” who is viewed as the opponent of love but the choice of the people clamouring in the marketplace (the industrialized city?). The passage is placed in quotation marks, but there is no clear indication as to who is speaking (Sorrow or “the man”?).

Barrabas was a robber. Lack-a-day!
We of the golden tissues floating far
And sandals jewel-laced — we need our thieves
Our Benedict Barrabas who can steal
With such bland gestures, and wise brows bent down
In plans financial, that the feeble-folk
Stand all at gaze in envy and delight
Yes — even while he plucks the crusts from lips
Blue with their torture for it. Away with Love,
Dark God of Voids — and if his frame be knit
Of any tissue tougher than a dream
Crucify him — pierce him to death with doubt,
Loose us Barrabus — we of the jewelled coifs!

After 54 more lines of chaotic and obscure rhetoric on the subject of Love and Hate, the blind woman, Sorrow, vanishes: “The sharp dust caught and veiled her, and she passed.” The poem again centres on the young man in the city, and the Barrabas theme:

The bitter eve grew vocal as he went.
The infant city nursing on the breast
Of unhewn woods found virile voice to shout
The cry of eighteen hundred years ago,
The church towers roared it in their evening chime:
"Loose us Barrabas! he will rear us high;
Will lay his gold along our organ pipes;
Will beat his stolen silver in our bells;
And stain our windows with the blood he robs
From the free Melot's heart. O Christ, O Christ!
Thy robe is sordid and thy palms are hard —
Hang on thy Cross! Loose us Barrabas, yes!
And while Christ hangs, the Thief shall build to him."
"Loose us Barrabas", all the busy marts
Buzzed with the cry, for none but robber thews
Can wrestle with fierce fortune, now-a-days.
Vice reared its supple serpent head and hissed:
"Loose us Barrabas — let our fellow free."
Want, lean, lank giant, honest and hunger-blind
Stood groaning 'tween the cries, and questioning:
Might not Barrabas be a newer Christ?
With newer gospel fitter for the time?

But there is one man who is not going to yield to the temptations of Barrabas
and the City, and this is Hugh, now for the first time mentioned by name. Hugh
for a time is groping and lost amidst the evils of poverty and greed:

    With the illimitable wilderness around
    From the close city hives rang up the groan
    "So little space! we starve — we faint — we die!"
    Lord! Lord! to see the gaping city sewer
    Beaded with haggard heads and hungry eyes
    Towering above the heaving of the drains
    And hear the harsh, unreasonable cry
    "We starve, we starve!" While half a world lay fresh
    And teeming, out beyond the city gates!

In this situation Hugh goes through a traumatic struggle with his Soul, who calls
on him: "Up, up, thou weakening! Wouldst thou lay thy palms/ Against a stub-
born world, to hurl it far/ Into a truer orbit — then up, up and forge/ Strong
sinews for the deed . . . Weld strength with strength, so let us face the world!"

    So spake his soul, and plucked him from the town
    With its young walls and venerable sins,
    The smell of primal woods upon its air
    The groans of Ancient Famine in its slums.
The next section of the poem finds Hugh in the forest. It is spring, and the life-giving rains are falling:

All through the night  
Life loosed the fountain of his heart  
And earth grew tremulous with pulsing seeds  
And leaping stems, and juices rushing up  
From her wide veins along the barren woods.

Under that influence Hugh's creative powers are released. He sees his task clearly and makes a vow, Old Testament-wise, to lead those whom the city has destroyed into the haven of the forest.

Hugh caught the dove of Spring between his palms  
And unashamed before his large thewed soul  
Drew her soft plumes against his warm breast  
And held her to his ear to coo her rime  
Of deep green woods, and creeks and purple hills.

I'll plunge to drowning depth in leaf-built waves  
And let them wash me from this clanging world  
That shrinks with steam — where mostly men are slaves  
That tend on iron tyrants — solid things  
That turn and rend the dream-like flesh and blood  
That forms and serves them — (I saw one monster take  
A serf that served it, in its mighty maw  
And comb his sweating flesh sheer from his bones  
With glittering fangs . . . )

The leafy shades shall wash  
The roaring of the city from my ears  
And drive before their sibilant strong rush  
The weak despair that sickens all my soul  
Bores through my brittle bones, and nips apart  
The very sinews of my straining mind.

And here is Hugh's prophecy and vow:

Then will I come again when I am healed  
And shout such gospel of the woods and plains  
As, like the music of the lean Hindoo  
Shall drag from sewers and drains, and noisome holes  
Worn-minded men who bore their abject way  
In pain and darkness through the city's mire.
I'll have them out! — A saviour of their flesh —
Yes, even while they howl about the streets
“Loose us Barrabas — we will cheapen toil
For him, and throne the robber on our necks!”
I'll have them out!  God, knit my sinews up.

Hugh's meditation on the saving powers of nature now begins to stir the more primitive instincts in him. Thus the "ideal" for the poet Crawford is always counterposed with the "natural" man's instincts for self-survival. Half Indian, Hugh turns his attention to the needs of his body:

The primal savage in him shook his gyves . . .
And like a hawk peered up the very sky
For quarry; and shamed, Hugh felt great throbs
wing his dull heels behind the scudding deer,
Beat at his wrists above the bending rod
And leap from out his very breast along
The keen, clear sky behind some dappled wing.
What honey made the marrow of the food
He chased and slew?  And from the very leaves
Joy wrung strong wine into his weary soul.

It is after this long, often tedious, but philosophically and dialectically useful introduction that we finally become engagé: The actual story of The Hunters Twain begins.

The structure of the passages that follow develops in a clear logical pattern:

"Dawn of Day 1"
"Midday Heat"
"Evening Sunset"
"Night (The Campfire)"

The poem then ends abruptly (clearly unfinished) with Hugh's midnight dream: a vision of storm in the wilderness. Broken off as it is at a violent and passionate moment, one gets the impression that the poem, if it had been completed, would have moved into the serenity of "Dawn of Day 2".

Let us return now to "Dawn of Day 1". The two men, hero and anti-hero, are found together in their tent. The hunt is over for the time being: a new day is beginning. Their argument, one feels, has been continuous: Hugh comes to
the wilderness with hope, Ion flees to it from despair. In a curious way they mix their metaphysics with their physical living. Although this section is written as third person narration it is so clearly a dramatic dialogue that I propose simply to set it up that way. So instead of “said Hugh” I will write Hugh:

Hugh: Now see
How buxom Hope becomes, with Diane’s bow
Laid on her shoulder, and her rosy foot
Inlaid with dew from fern and flag.
Come, grasp her hand, and stumble to your feet.

Ion: Nay . . . Hope built to breathe
From venison and trout and oxygen
Has so much clay knit in her throbbing flesh —
That clay will pluck her back to clay again.
Could I clasp Hope, she should be all a God
The builder not the built, and move strong wings
Wide as a world cleft into semi-spheres
And have great arms to thrust malignant stars
Back from her course along the Universe
And a broad foot to crush the serpent’s head
That lifts, and spits his poison in her face:
Hope, less the Goodhood — bury her for me!

Hugh: There cries a loon . . . and all our tent
Glows shiftingly; and on its canvas roof
Dance the dark shadows of deep leaves above.
Come, burst our lintels, and behold
Hope swimming up the dawn upon the world.

Ion: Strong with deer’s flesh . . . and the curve
Of tricky trout — stand you, my friend, at gaze:
I’ll build the fire, and brew the natant maid
A draught to cheer the kernel of her heart —
Hope, without breakfast, has a swooning trick!

There follows, in true Crawford style, an extended metaphor describing the arrival of the dawn. It is extremely lush, with a sensual, even sexual description of a naked woman, the personification of Dawn, who

Swam against the east, against her breast the night
Broke purple, and her curving arms beat back
The starry surf . . .
Naked, a second, on the shore she stood
With all the innocent small feathered things
Flying to touch the scarlet, lined bars
Of her stretched fingers, and against her knees
Rubbed the soft sides of shadowy deer, and high
The squirrels chattered at her from rich boughs —
Then warmer wound the blood wide in her veins,
She moved an ardent palm, and drew the mists
From lakes, and swamps and valleys, and their folds
Spiced with the cedar and the balsam — bright
On their curled edges with a saffron dye
She upward drew along her rosy knees
Her ivory thighs, the silver of her breast.
So veiled and draped she waited for the sun.

Ion: These mists are prophets of a torrid day
       a fierce, red day
Of zenith summer, snorting in sharp peals
Of dry, short thunder, as a stallion snorts
At gaze at midday on an arid plain
The herd afar — where ere the fevered palm
Falls on him, leaps an artery of fire.
What see you in the dawn? Come, prophet, speak!

Hugh: I see dead night . . . and tears that dry
In aching eyes turned on the growing light.

Ion: But that dead night! . . . Many slaves
Died at his burial; where may be their dawn?
Stark at his feet they lie — their leaking hearts
Dust on his sere clothes. Lo, for some the dawn
Is named despair! and you — you call her Hope!

Hugh: Aye Hope . . . and by her sturdy side
And ruddy kertle hangs my fluttering soul.
No goddess she — but God's own very breath
Shaped into one grave splendour of the East
Come, Ion, love her! Clasp strong palms with her.

Ion: Your dawn! . . . Sometimes she drove
The last nail in the gallows — and the wretch
Wakes to the rope beneath her rosy palms.
O God, your Hope! A smoke-wreath of the soul —
Despair a firm flint rock beneath the feet!
Give me despair's strong certainty — I'll stand
On the grim cliff, and dominate the world
Aye — use it tripod-wise, and sybil-like
Look from it through the universe, and see
The birth of ruins, and the horrid flames
Of bursting worlds — The man who hopes and laughs
Is nature's fool and wears her motley well.

Hugh: Then I am grateful for my cap and bells —
... And nature's zany is her king!

In this vein the argument between the two men continues, a bantering irony. Neither wins, but Hugh culminates his case with a transcendental vision of reincarnation as the hope of the universe:

So are the souls of men
Caught from the secret spaces in the war
Of circumstances rudey moulded, and sped on
Along eternity from sphere to sphere
Polished in speeding — O this clanging world
Is no snug nest for doves! My Hope, you see,
Faces eternities — Archangels hold
Her torches high against the mysteries
Their soaring wings still seek — and yet she smiles
Into the daisy, drying on the grave,
And leaves the dewy jewel of her dawn
Starred in its withering breast.

To all of this high rhetoric Ion finally replies:

I hope! in faith, so keenly hope [that]
I see some half-hour hence the flashing trout —
Yet snug in yonder pool — yield mellowly
His rose-leaf flakes and opal curds to us.

And thereupon one of the two friends — it is not clear which — bursts into song, in celebration of "The dawn I love". That song is the well-known lyric, "The Dark Stag", which was first published in a somewhat different version in the Toronto Evening Telegram on November 28, 1883. I have indicated in brackets changes that have been made, presumably by Crawford (but why, one might ask, would she have changed that striking epithet, "The stout and lusty stag" to "strong and dusky"?). I have also numbered the original stanzas in the order given in Crawford's revised version.

"A startled stag, the blue grey Night
Leaps down beyond dark pines
Behind, a length of yellow light,
   The hunter's arrow shines
His mocassins are stained with red
   He bends upon his knee
From covering peaks his shafts are sped
The blue mists plume his mighty head!
   Well may the dark stag flee!

*The moon like a snow-white doe* (The pale, pale moon, a
   Bounds by his dappled flank; snow-white doe)
They beat the stars down as they go
   As wood-bells growing rank. (like)
The winds lift dew-laps from the ground
   Leap from *dry shaking* reeds (the quaking)
Their hoarse bays shake the *cedars* round (forests)
With keen cries on the *trail* they bound (track)
   Swift, swift the dark stag speeds!

Roar the rent lakes, as thro' the waves
   Their silver warriors plunge
As vaults from core of crystal caves
   The *vast*, fierce maskelongs (strong)
Red torches of the sumach glow
   Fall's council fires are lit
The bittern, squaw-like, scolds the air
   The *waving* rice-spears knit. (Rustling)

Shaft after shaft the red sun speeds
   Rent the stag's dappled side,
His breast to *fangs of hoarse bleeds* (fanged by the shrill words
   He staggers on the tide.
He feels the hungry waves of space
   Rush at him high and blue
The white spray smites his dusky face (their)
Swifter the sun's *swift* arrows race (fierce)
   And pierce his *strong* heart through. (stout)

Away! his white doe, far behind
   Lies wounded on the plain
Yells at his flank the nimblest wind
After this ecstatic song — Crawford's paean of delight in which the poet and her two personae are all worshippers — the narrative moves into description of a magic scene on the lake. It contains perhaps the best example of "clean" direct language, free from Victorian rhetorical trappings. As such, it offers a hint of how the poet's imagination, when released through participation in nature, finds a language that is increasingly fresh and natural. Like Emily Carr, she begins to paint in her own true fashion.

Later they laid the silver bough canoe
On the fresh tide and paddled from the shore.

Hugh: Hush, hush — O paddle, noiseless slip
Through velvet waters, dusky, deep and still
As hearts of newborn flowers and thou, Canoe,
Make smooth thy birchen sides, and like a beam
That pushes night all noiselessly aside
Part the still lake — Lo, all the little isles
Seem at a mid air, mystic anchorage
Sky laved at granite plinth, and cedar crest
As though a god stood doubting — holding them
Between the wave and sky. And shall I pluck
Them up to gem my calm immortal lakes?
Or shall I spare them yet a space to man?
Eastward the large, long shadows lie and gaze
Into brown waters — Westward on gold feet
The sultry light stands on the polished lakes
And eyes the raven thunder cloud that flies
With plumes all rent far down the curving wave.
Ion, behold! here lies the old mossed crib
Knit to yon isle by weft of reaching vines,
Fringed with round lilies; and a bubble floats
On the sleek wave — a little rainbow world
With isles and pines and lilies set in it!
Cool, cool the smooth brown shadows! Lo, how quakes
Yon lily in the deep core of the shade!
There drop the line — there lurks the spangled fin!

Ion: We will bait the hook with Hope
And with keen hope the trout will nibble it!
And then to one — despair — to trout or man!

Hugh: The trout is welcome to the hope a trout
Can nibble from the hook. Now draw
The paddle in — like a swan’s foot it shines
And frights the fish — Against this lily bed
We’ll lie — and silence-gild our dangling bait.

Here follows a somewhat irrelevant series of expository lines which describe
the psychological background of the two young men. The material is interesting
but its introduction at this point halts the flow of the narrative and the dialogue.
It seems highly probable that if Crawford had ever revised this poem she would
have inserted those descriptive passages much earlier on. I therefore omit them
here.

Meanwhile the fishing scene continues: two men in a canoe out on a lily
pond. It is exciting to find that the next song is none other than “The Lily Bed”
(first published in Collected Poems, 1905). Ion is the singer.
There has been considerable critical speculation about this lyric. We know now, in fact, that there were two men in the canoe. But Ion appears to be the only one, in the song. He pushes his paddle down and he is so overcome by the breathless beauty of the landscape — forest mirrored in lake — that the metaphor overpowers him. We feel his utter silence, "cloaked in a golden pause." And out of this silence which has now become personified as a chief "in his lodge of leaves" there arises the image of the tree as a hunter, wooing the water as maiden.

Ion now draws his paddle up and as his canoe rocks on the lily-pads the lily blossoms sing to him with "their cool lips" and cling "to the frail sides." And now the lilies have become girls, "With breast and lip they wove a bar." As evening deepens cool winds spring up and "They swayed the high, dark trees, and low / Swept the locked lilies to and fro." The key melody, that couplet, ends the song — but with a difference: "He pushed out" from the lily bed. The tale is over. Once again I reproduce the original as it stands in the manuscript, with the revisions in brackets at the side; in this case it is possible that the revisions may have been made by Garvin.

"His cedar paddle, scented red
He thrust down in the lily-bed.

Cloaked in a golden pause he lay
Locked in the arms of the bay. (placid)

Trembled alone his bark canoe
As shocks of bursting lilies flew

Thro' the still pulses of the tide, (crystal)
And smote the frail boat's silvery side (birchen)

Or when, beside the sedges thin
Flashed the sharp jewel of a fin; (Rose . . . silver)

Or when, a wizard swift and bold (cold)
A dragonfly lashed out in gold (beat)

And fire and flame, the widening rings (And jewels all)
Of waters whispering to his wings (singing)

Or when, like a winged and burning soul,
Dropped from the gloom an oriole

On the cool wave, as to the balm
Of the Great Spirit's open palm
The freed soul flies. Soft silence clung (And)
To the still hours as tendrils hung,

In darkness carven, from the trees
Sedge-buried to their burly knees.

Stillness sat in her lodge of leaves, (his)
Clung golden shadows to its eaves,

And on its spicy floor like maize (cone-spiced)
Red-ripe, fell sheaves of knotted rays.

The wood, a proud and crested brave;
Bead-bright, a maiden, stood the wave.

And he had told his tale of love (spoke his soul)
With voice of eagle and of dove.

Of loud, peaked pines his tongue had made; (strong)
His lips soft blossoms of the shade

That kissed her silver lips — hers cool
As lilies on his inmost pool

Till now he stood in triumph's rest
His image in her crystal breast; (painted in her breast)

One isle 'tween blue and blue did melt
A bead of wampum from the belt,

Of Manitou — a purple rise
On the far shore slipped up the skies. (heaved to the)

His cedar paddle scented red
He drew up from the lily bed.

All lily-locked, all lily-locked
*The* light bark on the blossoms rocked. (His)

Their cool lips round the sharp prow sang,
Their soft *palms to the pale* sides sprang. (clasp to the frail)

With breasts and lips they wove a bar —
Stole from her lodge the Evening Star,

With golden hand she grasped the mane
Of a cloud on the azure plain. (red)

It by the *coned* red sunset flew (peaked)
Cool winds from its bright nostrils blew.
They swayed the high dark trees and low
Swept the locked lilies to and fro.

With cedar paddle, scented red
He pushed out from the lily-bed.

The narrative continues:

Thus Ion sang, and rustling thro' the rice
They met the shining fingers of the moon
Thrust thro' the woods to touch the shining lake:
She lifted mellow lips to dying day
And all her kisses quivered into stars.
Then from the large rose of the lake leaped up
A million little lilied mists that played
And curled before the prow; like naiad hands
Bore the birch bark in snowy palms, and hid
The rice, the lilies, and the flashing wave.

Hugh's song which follows I have titled "The Tent." As far as can be determined it was never published. Interestingly, although it follows the same metrical pattern as Ion's "Lily Bed" song, it lapses more often into colloquial phrasing.

THE TENT (Hugh's song)

There stands my tent secure between
Two pointed pines, twin guards of green

My palace of mid-pine delight!
The canvas walls no longer white:

By smoke from camp-fires keenly kist
Into a dim, dim coil of mist

By past long summers, bronzed as brown
As cones from pine peaks shaken down.

Would I thy mellow walls exchange
For snowy canvas fresh and strange?

Perish the thought! there's not a rent
Or stain, I'd spare thee from, my tent!

Lo, that long wound healed with a seam
Thou hadst it in Walpurgian dream
Of branches bellowing through the night
As when strong, leafy giants fight,
A smitten pine, his dying grip
Laid on thee with faint finger-tip,
And jagged thee sore — That russet strain
The fire-kiss of a flaming plain!
That patch — 'tis victory's squalid flag
Against thee hurled the hounded stag
Fangs at his throat, he reels! he falls!
His antlers in thy yielding walls.
Thy linen lintel bears a blot
I would not move a single jot.
O misty, yellow, murmurous eaves,
On crooked sticks displumed of leaves
I hung beneath thy trembling thatch
The scaly treasures of my "catch"!
The speckled sweetmeat of the stream
The darling of the angler's dream,
The silver of the creek
That leaps, a pale nymph, from the peak
Of woody hill, and on her way
Shares such sun flashes, as she may;
And from the glittering rays, small doubt
Evolves her jewel's sprite, the trout!
Then later, simple ecstasy
That grew between my pipe and me
Impletion of serene content!
Joy to thy smoky walls, my tent!

Now that Hugh and Ion are safely back at their camp, having lit their campfire and cooked their trout, they cease their singing and take up their longstanding argument. The marked contrast between the characters of the two friends, the optimist and cynic, is highlighted in this dialogue.

So sped the eve, and lying on piled spruce
Beside the red camp-fire, Hugh mused and planned;
And Ion smoked, or sang his sorrow songs
That sounded merrily, to say the least.
Thus Hugh, with eyes large on the ebon woods:

Hugh: A fine, full soil-free grants for every soul —
Pure water — timber — hills for little towns —
Shelter for cattle in the valley dips.
I'll search no further — hither my colony
Shall tramp; here tent, and touch red Plenty's robe.

Ion: Yes — and yonder frowning isle
That burst the lake so furiously at birth,
The wave still hisses round it — there your jails
Can cage their birds. Oh, all fits well!
Heights for your towns and temples — rugged rocks
To hold your ready rogues, meek murderers
Your multi-married, and the hoary heads
That whitened churches, while the hungry hands
Plucked at the public placket — or betrayed
The orphan's trust. Oh, all fits very well!
Prepare the wilderness for crime — and man!

Hugh: Nay, man and crime. . . . name man the first:
He is the stronger — yield him all his rights.

Ion: O optimist! O owl that through the pitch
Of midnight gazes clearest! And no doubt
Sees the grim ruins gay, to his round orbs!

Hugh: . . . Behold this bay, how firm the sweep
Of the high headlands heaved from its deep heart.
Here wharves shall grow, and docks, and sails shall set
To this large shelter, from the furious leaps
Of yon unsalted sea.

Ion: And to their slimy lips shall steal at night
Lost mothers with their bastards at their breasts
And stare a moment at the town behind,
A moment at the stars, then make the choice
Of filthy water. Spurned merrily by Fate
The madmen of Dispair shall leap from them
And rotting ships, brave in fresh paint, shall swing
Loose from them to the wrecking; thus it holds
in my young, leafy Athens, thus it holds
in Babylon.
Hugh: ... And thus it holds
Round our rude star: from hurricanes slip up
Sleek calms, and healthier airs — and hideous slimes
Labour with lilies — O, God's moulding place
Is full of riot, roar of furnaces
Glaring of metal, recurring in fierce tides —
Smoke, violence and strife — but ever tends
The storm to music, and the strife to peace.
Mayhap the music sounds dim aeons hence,
Perchance the Peace shapes on immortal shores.

Ion: Hope is your creed! ... You cling
To rainbows, like the elves in picture books!
You ride the moth, and clasp the trembling reed!
Ion I worship — sets my soul that way.
And Hope is Pythia to the God I know,
Utters His will; and looks along His Hand
Stretched through the Coming Ages shaping them.

Hugh: Shall I pass sentence and condemn myself
To present Hell, and consort with damned souls?
... 
God is God and Hope
His chiepest prophet!

Ion: Prove that! I'll be your pupil then.
Yes, faith, I will.

Hugh: Proof, proof! ... Nay, work the problem out
Alone; nor waste your toil on it unless
You feel at times the passionate, plain pang
Of adoration paining all your soul
And hear, "'Tis well to worship" from her lips.
Then seek my God, and you shall find his Hope.

In the meantime, roll up that lusty log
Astride the flames — the night grows pale and chill.

So saying, the hunters' argument trails off into smoke and dreams.

Hugh lay and dreamed, with movements of the feet
And starting fingers, and with pricking ears
Full of the crash of stags, thro' brush and fern
And ripping of deep waves by dappled breasts.
And so his spirit struggled with the earth
Then upward burst to the clear airs of sleep.
THE HUNTERS TWAIN

While Hugh sleeps, one may ask, does not the canoe speak of “my masters twain”? That song would seem to be most fitting at this point in the narrative; but it is not to be found in this manuscript or in the known Crawford archives. Instead of that song, or any concluding passage on the stag hunt, we have a final fragment which might be titled: “Hugh’s Dream”. In it the darkness and the violence takes over — indicating those “presences” that are just beyond the rim of the campfire in “Said the Canoe”.

He clung against the blackness of a cliff
With bat-sharp nails, and felt against his lips
The awful granite that he could not see.
Against his naked soles he felt a cloud
Rub its dark down as if an eagle passed.
Thunder filled space: the thunder spirits rolled
Their balls in such hot sport, the roaring orbs
Smote side to side. Then to the south some sped —
A riot of red arrows rushing down
On the swift bird that ever flies before
Their ruddy shafts, yet never drops to them.

Below him leaped the thunders of the Lake;
Against his breast, reverberant, the cliff
Belched brittle echoes; burst from every pass
Responsive floods of sound, as to the Joy
Of the wild thunders they lent their rocky throats.
Night! Was this night, or some space set apart
For lasting dark scorched with the lightning’s blast?
His soul stood tip-toe for the groan of woods:
For forests grow by sun, but stone and wave
Made all this world; and thunders all its voice.
Deep dawns of newer darkness filled the east
Till, like a swamp-bred monster’s hide, the sky
Grew wrinkled with them, and the lightning’s shafts
Broke on their fleeter blackness, wave on wave —
Sprang as a growing buck leaps upon his foe
That fights him for his mate — and rearing high
Grew lank against his stretching foe, and roared
[And with fanged furious stabs tore at his throat] (line scratched
[And so] with branches locked they strove and reeled. out)

So ends this poem which I have named “The Hunters Twain”. The great lyric that finally burst to light from its shaggy loins must surely have been “Said the
Canoe" . . . which I re-publish here. Its first known printing was in The Toronto Telegram, December 8, 1883.

SAID THE CANOE

My masters twain made me a bed
Of pine-boughs resinous, and cedar;
Of moss, a soft and gentle breeder
Of dreams of rest; and me they spread
With furry skins and, laughing, said:
"Now she shall lay her polished sides
As queens do rest, or dainty brides,
Our slender lady of the tides!"

My masters twain their camp-soul lit;
Streamed incense from the hissing cones;
Large crimson flashes grew and whirled;
Thin golden nerves of sly light curled
Round the dun camp; and rose faint zones,
Half way about each grim bole knit,
Like a shy child that would bedeck
With its soft clasp a Brave's red neck,
Yet sees the rough shield on his breast,
The awful plumes shake on his crest,
And, fearful, drops his timid face,
Nor dares complete the sweet embrace.

Into the hollow hearts of brakes —
Yet warm from sides of does and stags
Passed to the crisp, dark river-flags —
Sinuous, red as copper-snakes,
Sharp-headed serpents, made of light,
Glided and hid themselves in night.

My masters twain the slaughtered deer
Hung on forked boughs with thongs of leather:
Bound were his stiff, slim feet together,
His eyes like dead stars cold and drear.
The wandering firelight drew near
And laid its wide palm, red and anxious,
On the sharp splendour of his branches,
On the white foam grown hard and sere
On flank and shoulder.
Death — hard as breast of granite boulder —
Under his lashes

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Peered thro' his eyes at his life's grey ashes.
My masters twain sang songs that wove —
As they burnished hunting-blade and rifle —
A golden thread with cobweb trifle,
Loud of the chase and low of love:

"O Love! art thou a silver fish,
Shy of the line and shy of gaffing,
Which we do follow, fierce, yet laughing,
Casting at thee the light-winged wish?
And at the last shall we bring thee up
From the crystal darkness, under the cup
   Of lily folden
   On broad leaves golden?

"O Love! art thou a silver deer
With feet as swift as wing of swallow,
While we with rushing arrows follow?
And at the last shall we draw near
And o'er thy velvet neck cast thongs
Woven of roses, stars and songs —
   New chains all moulden
   Of rare gems olden?"

They hung the slaughtered fish like swords
   On saplings slender; like scimitars,
   Bright, and ruddied from new-dead wars,
Blazed in the light the scaly hordes.

They piled up boughs beneath the trees,
   Of cedar web and green fir tassel.
   Low did the pointed pine tops rustle,
The camp-fire blushed to the tender breeze.

The hounds laid dewlaps on the ground
   with needles of pine, sweet, soft and rusty,
   Dreamed of the dead stag stout and lusty;
A bat by the red flames wove its round.

The darkness built its wigwam walls
   Close round the camp, and at its curtain
   Pressed shapes, thin, woven and uncertain
As white locks of tall waterfalls.
THE HUNTERS TWAIN

The reader of this “reading” is now entitled to ask: does the publication of this hitherto unknown manuscript fundamentally change the critics’ view of Isabella Valancy Crawford?

In my opinion it adds to her stature and confirms her virtuosity. It illustrates that she saw herself as a narrative-philosophical poet whose role it was to define the epic aspects of immigration, settlement and pioneer life in Ontario. Further, more than any other Canadian poet of her period, Crawford is shown to be deeply aware of the social, class and moral clashes that arise in a free-enterprise society. Although perhaps she is best known and loved for her lyrics in praise of love, she was no mere lyricist. She possessed a political conscience.

This unpublished manuscript is valuable in another, literary sense. It gives a clue as to Crawford’s creative method, “the poet at work”. She wrote at white heat impelled by passion. The result is often wordy and even chaotic, showing little regard for syntax, spelling, punctuation or the dangers of repetition. There is clear evidence that she did spend time on revision, but it is difficult to see the rationale behind her revisions (see especially “The Dark Stag”). At times she uses inversion of subject and predicate with great force (as was true in “The Helot” and in Malcolm’s Katie) but she relies on this rhetorical device too often. What emerges however, from this method of composition (and is it also true of Malcolm’s Katie, which I take to be earlier than The Hunters Twain) is that Crawford worked on a generous scale with a broad canvas in view; and out of this wide documentation of detail and theme she allowed her imagination to lift her free into pure lyric song. She responds to the wilderness with love, not fear; and she believes that love will win, if only man will work with nature and not against her. In this sense Crawford is the most modern of the Confederation Poets and the most relevant for us here and now in the Seventies.

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In following the original text I have had to make modifications in spelling and punctuation, to suit modern practice.

D.L.

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NOTES

1 For instance, her greatest achievement in the narrative form is undoubtedly the dialect poem, *Old Spookses Pass*: a tour de force linguistically and dramatically. It is set in an imagined locale never experienced in real life by the poet, who never moved west of Ontario. Thus, long before Robert Service arrived on the scene Crawford was writing a true “western” in ballad form.

2 As in an opera, Crawford has skilfully combined the lyric moments with the dramatic tension. There is documented evidence that she saw and heard Italian opera in Toronto.

3 Embedded in this poem are two famous lyrics: “The Dark Stag” and “The Lily Bed”. There is one unpublished lyric, “The Tent”, in the same style as “The Lily Bed”; and a strong indication that the famous poem, “Said the Canoe”, was part and parcel of *The Hunters Twain* manuscript.

4 The total unfinished manuscript is some 800 lines long, in iambic pentameter, written by hand on lined sheets of legal size foolscap. The indication is that Crawford was short of paper and that she used every inch of space, crowding together section upon section. Since only a long pen-stroke separates each “piece” from another, there is as yet no way of telling whether any one “piece” is intended to be a part of the whole structure. Only in the last half is there a flowing, integrated narrative line, combined with lyrical bursts.

5 Most curious here is the use of the word *simooms* which are found only in desert country: “hot sandwinds”.
