

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of the narrative background to Isabella Valancy Crawford's poems, The Dark Stag, The Lily Bed and The Canoe; from an unpublished manuscript, "Without, the West drew flaming gates across .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.¹ 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 In their 1905 *Collected Poems* they omitted quite a number of published poems, and several unpublished ones.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.² 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*.³

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).⁴

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;³ 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 Benedit 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 weakling! Wouldst thou lay thy palms/ Against a stubborn 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.

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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 shrieks 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

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 rudely 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.

(1)

“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!

(2)

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!

(5)

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

(6)

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. bleeds)
 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)

(3)

Away! his white doe, far behind
 Lies wounded on the plain
 Yells at his flank the nimblest wind

His large tears fall *like* rain (in)
Like lily-pads small clouds grow white
About his darkling way
From her bald nest upon the height
The red-eyed eagle sees his flight
He falters — turns — the antlered night
The black stag stands at bay!

(4)

His feet are in the waves of space
His antlers broad and dun
He lowers, and turns his velvet face
To front the hunter sun,
He stamps the liliated clouds and high
His branches fill the west,
The lean stork sails across the sky
The shy loon shrieks to see him die
The winds leap at his breast.

(7)

His antlers fall — once more he spurns
The hoarse hounds of the day
His blood upon the crisp blue burns
Reddens the mounting spray
His branches smite the wave — with cries
The *shrill* winds *pausing*, flag (wild winds pause and flag)
He sinks in space — red glow the skies;
The brown earth crimson as he dies
The *stout* and *lusty* stag!" (strong and dusky)

After this ecstatic song — Crawford's paeon 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 liliated 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.
A campfire flared far on an ebon spear
Of pine-black land that split the lake, and pale
Their tent gleamed in the light, and Hugh beheld
And sang a paean to its canvas caves.

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 camp-fire and cooked their trout, they cease their singing and take up their long-standing 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 chiefest 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.

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

THE HUNTERS TWAIN

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 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.

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".