

# TOWARDS A NATIVE MYTHOLOGY:

## *The Poetry of Isabella Valency Crawford*

*Ann Yeoman*

We must enter the new period for ourselves, because though truth, the radiance of reality, is universally one and the same, it is mirrored variously according to the mediums in which it is reflected. Truth appears differently in different lands and ages according to the living materials out of which its symbols are hewn.<sup>1</sup>

HEINRICH ZIMMER

**H** EINRICH ZIMMER is here speaking of the development of Occidental religious philosophy and the need for the Western world to evolve within its own structure, reaching its own, rather than borrowed, solutions. He emphasizes the need for every age, as well as every civilization, to bring forth its own symbols, rituals and images. This theory would seem to apply to the growth of any nation, or group of people, in their desire to assert themselves as a significant entity in the eyes of the world. It follows that the process is paralleled in the development of a nation's literature and must, to the extent that art expresses and defines a given culture, grow partly out of its conscious art forms. C. G. Jung alludes to a similar process when he speaks of the collective level of the consciousness, the contents of which belong to a nation, or whole group of people, rather than just to one individual. He points out that the contents of the collective consciousness "are not acquired during the individual's lifetime but are products of innate forms and instincts."<sup>2</sup>

If these ideas are applied to the growth of an emergent nation and that nation's literature, there appears the need for basic, characteristic symbols and a native mythology — a mythology which both grows out of the evolving culture and clarifies it, thus preparing for still further growth. Mythology, and consequently the symbols and images which derive from a mythology, is seen by Northrop Frye as the "matrix of literature" in that it defines "a society's religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations."<sup>3</sup> In the early, pre-Confederation days of Canadian poetry, it is not difficult to understand the need to impose European standards and literary ideals on an unknown, uncultivated land: religious belief, historical tradition, etc., had to be brought to Canada from Europe. Heinrich Zimmer, in the passage quoted above, implies the difficulties that arise when foreign, or preconceived, ideas are imposed on a land whose basic "living materials" are so different.

These difficulties are evident in the earlier Canadian poets, such as O'Grady, Goldsmith and Sangster. O'Grady's reaction is one of helplessness in the face of a hostile "barren waste". In Goldsmith's poem, "The Rising Village", the Indian and the wild beast are equated, in that peace only comes to the settler when both "Have fled to wilds beneath the northern star". Charles Sangster also refers to the Indian as a race that has "passed away", and suffuses his verse with the inappropriate trappings of nineteenth century English pastoral poetry. It is not until the poetry of Isabella Valancy Crawford that there appears to have been any serious attempt at the creation of a purely native mythology, or language of symbols. And, both the formal structure of her poetry, and the knowledge of the classical education she received from her father, point to much of Crawford's work as being a *conscious* attempt.

In his article on Crawford, James Reaney refers to the poet's attempt to use "images grammatically rather than intuitively", and to re-use an image over and over again, with each use adding to the symbolic dimension and thus carrying an infinitely "larger" symbol on to the next poem.<sup>4</sup> This implies the essential "private mythology" of every poet, which Frye believes to arise out of that poet's own "spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols."<sup>5</sup> If this "extension of symbol" is insufficient, it can either fail, being unnoticed by the reader, or can serve to render the poetry extremely personalized. Crawford, however, draws on the immediate "living" material of Pre-Confederation Canada for her initial image, and works it extensively and sympathetically within the structure of her own society, but she also draws from primitive and classical mythologies and their basic, underlying archetypes.

This process, of the careful development of a symbolic language, can be better understood by tracing certain symbols that appear throughout Crawford's poetry. The image of the water-lily occurs frequently, gathering in significance until it points to Crawford's own poetic conception of Eternity and freedom, both of which will be discussed later. In one of the earlier poems, the lily appears as an adornment of Laughter's gown — "Laughter wears a lilled gown".<sup>6</sup> At this point, and with the further image of Laughter's eyes being "water-brown,/Ever glancing up and down", the effect seems merely to glorify Laughter through the association of Laughter with the pied-beauty of a pond of lilies reflecting a summer sun.

In "The Camp of Souls", the image appears again :

As the calm, large stars in the  
           deep sky rest,  
 The yellow lilies upon them  
           [the lakes] float.

Here, the lily is associated with the stars, heavenly bodies, and with Manitou's happy hunting-ground beyond the River of Death: the association, then, is with Eternity and life-after-death. In "Said The Skylark", the lily reflects an ideal to which the skylark aspires, for it is associated with the "fair, small Cloud, grown small as lily flower", which the skylark cannot reach. However, the image of the lily is here also evolving as a symbol for freedom, the lily-flower cloud being something far beyond the attainment of a *caged* skylark. If the skylark is seen as the traditional image for man's soul, trapped by the cage of the body, then another dimension is added — one of human spiritual aspiration.

Finally, in "The Lily Bed", the previous symbolic levels of the lily image, reflecting freedom, aspiration, the Eternal, etc., are combined. The lily pond becomes a bourne, a sanctuary, and the canoer is "Locked in the arms of the placid bay". There is the sense of a particular and ideal moment in time being sustained. From the time in the poem when the cedar paddle enters the water to the time when it is withdrawn, there are many references to "the freed soul", — to love and the unity of opposites ("With voice of eagle and dove"), — to Manitou, and Eternity in the heaving of the far shore to join with the stars, — to the Evening Star, traditionally a star symbolizing rest, and hence, death.

The lily-bed, then, becomes a symbol for the moment of peace and transcendence, when the soul is free and such polarities as the eagle and the dove, love and death, are contained within that one perfect moment. The assimilation of

essential polarities and dichotomies within a single vision appears to be the basic theme of most of Crawford's work. This returns us to the discussion of mythology. For Frye, "the central myth of art must be the vision at the end of social effort, the innocent world of fulfilled desires, the free human society." This would appear to be a unified and essentially simple and ordered world, and is usually reflected in literature as a heaven or Eden. This vision, then, must be a "vision of innocence which sees the world in terms of total human intelligibility",<sup>7</sup> and is therefore a vision constructed of primitive image or basic archetypes ("communicable symbol . . . typical image").<sup>8</sup>

**I**N HER OWN ATTEMPT to create a vision of primal unity, Crawford often returns to the primitive concept of a world populated by gods, mostly nature gods, or a God or gods other than the omnipotent Christian deity (see "The Camp of Souls", "The Lily Bed", "Gisli the Chieftain" . . .). This, the primitive world, is a world in which there is no division between the gods and nature, or man and nature, for it is only the concept of an all-powerful, yet all-benevolent deity, leaving no natural place for evil in the universal system, which leads to the dualities that Crawford attempts to reconcile through her poetry. "The Christian concept of the Devil is unique, marking a total break with all polarized ideas of light and darkness, life and death, good and evil, as aspects of a single reality that transcends and yet expresses itself through them."<sup>9</sup>

In building a vision of a universe which contains both good and evil, black and white, love and death, etc., Crawford is not only going beyond the constructs of literature and mythology to the fundamental archetypes from which primitive ritual and then mythology arose; she is also clearly working with the environment she discovered in a then undeveloped Canada. Rather than rejecting the Indian and the wilderness as the earlier poets had done, Crawford embraces both and, in the attempt to create a working mythology, arrives at the necessary stage of 'humanizing' nature. This "absorption of the natural cycle into mythology" Frye sees as essential: "The total form of art . . . is a world whose content is nature but whose form is human; hence when it imitates nature it assimilates nature to human forms."<sup>10</sup> Reaney sees this process as the necessity to evolve a symbol in which mind and nature become the same thing so that the "unknown" world can be absorbed into the consciousness. Such an absorption would eradicate any possibility of a dualism arising between the concepts of man and nature.

The assimilation of nature and the Indian culture is clearly seen in "Said The Canoe". The first symbol which strikes the reader is, of course, that of the canoe itself, which is personified and also deified — "Now she shall lay her polished sides/As queens do rest, or dainty brides" (p. 67). Referring to the discussion on the evolution of a symbol, the symbol of the canoe has specific significance. In "The Camp of Souls" the canoe appears as the bark which transports the soul to and fro between the after-world and the earth; in "The Lily Bed" the canoe is the means whereby the centre of the lily bed and, symbolically, freedom and unity of soul, are attained, — the image of the canoe, then, is associated with transportation of the soul, both as a means of passage from life to death and as a vehicle of transcendence.

Similarly, after a reading of "The Camp of Souls" the line "My masters twain their camp-soul lit" has religious and spiritual echoes which emphasize the ritualistic atmosphere of the stanza, the process of burning incense and lighting the fire. The camp-fire assumes human qualities — "Thin gold nerves of sly light curled . . ." — and other parts of nature are seen in terms of fire — "and ruddied from new-dead wars,/Blazed in the light the scaly hordes". Opposing images of death and love, cold and heat, etc., are placed side by side, and are united in the songs of the two masters, who sing both "Loud of the chase and low of love". Read in the context of the other poems, "The Lily Bed" and "The Camp of Souls", it seems possible that the poet is expressing these dualities in the figures of the two masters, who simultaneously "rule", and exist within, the soul (the canoe). If this is the case, it is interesting to note in the final stanza that "Darkness built its wigwam walls/Close round the camp", — these images of total darkness and the circle occur throughout Crawford's poetry and appear to symbolize the primal state, the swirling black state of chaos out of which the primitive gods were born and in which good and evil are necessary energies working towards the reconstruction of Eternity; the circle, having neither beginning nor end, signifies the totality of such a vision, and Eternity itself.

**T**HE FIRE IMAGERY, a unifying image in "Said The Canoe", also appears in many other poems. In "The Lily Bed", Crawford refers to a "burning soul"; in "Gisli the Chieftain", flames escape from both sun and crater; the Goddess Lada weaves a tapestry of flame ("Warp and weft of flame she wove"); but more important is the stanza:

To the Love Queen Gisli prayed.  
Groaned far icebergs, tall and blue,  
As to Lada's distaff slim  
All their ice-locked fires blew.

In a later stanza "all the subtle fires of earth" are referred to. Fire is certainly used as a symbol of duality, being both constructive, in that it warms the body, and destructive, in that it can consume man as well as nature. More than this, however, I feel that Crawford is using the image to express the essence of nature as a whole and the particular essence of everything within nature: the gods seem to inhabit Crawford's natural world. This is seen in "The Ghosts of the Trees", where the ghost, or spirit of the tree, the tree-god, appears to rule and be a part of the things of man as well as the things of nature:

I have pushed apart,  
The mountain's heart,  
I have trod the valley down; . . .

When I reared my head  
From its old-time bed,  
Shook the pale cities of man . . .

I built men's graves  
With strong-thewed waves.

This might be paralleled with much of the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who explored the innermost fire, or essence of every part of nature as it appeared to him to be a manifestation of God: the essence, or quality of God within a cold grey ember, for Hopkins, was that last flash of fire when the ember falls and is dashed open on the ground in a final burst of light (see Hopkins' "The Windhover"). So, too, for Crawford, the essence of the iceberg is that last flash of fire before it is destroyed — the union of two opposites, cold and heat, in death.

To return to the recurring image of the circle and darkness: in "Between the Wind and Rain", the archetypal garden is depicted as a retreat from impending evil, the storm. The eagle is naively seen by the narrator as possessing that freedom which allows him to ride above the storm, above evil, "to some great planet of eternal peace". However, as the gyre, the spiral which points to Eternity and order, turns back on itself at every turn, so the eagle only attains real freedom when he "beats the wild storm apart that rings the earth", afterwards returning to his haven in the wind-dashed cliff. Love is seen here as a transcendent force

(as in "Malcolm's Katie") enabling the lover to transcend the reality of "good versus evil" and reach a level of peace in his love.

In "Old Spookses' Pass", the force of evil is represented by the stampede of the cattle in the night. The cowboy, however, does not resist the evil (he believes in no devil but that evil is the working of God's "own great plan"). Instead, he descends into the stampede and rides with it until the herd "mills" into a large, black circle of calm, and the cowboy finds his own peace. Again, the descension into evil points the path to God, or a glimpse of Eternity, in that a spiritual unity is understood. The opposing forces of good and evil working together towards the reconstruction of Eternity, both essential forces, are nowhere more clearly stated than in "Gisli, the Chieftain":

Said the voice of Evil to the ear of Good,  
 "Clasp thou my strong right hand,  
 Nor shall our clasp be known or understood  
 By any in the land.

"I, the dark giant, rule strong on the earth;  
 Yet thou, bright one, and I  
 Sprang from the one great mystery — at one birth  
 We looked upon the sky.

In "Malcolm's Katie", this mythological concept of a primal god, — of the need to assimilate evil in order to attain the promise of Eternity, an understanding of Paradise and re-capture innocence, — of love as a transcendent force, — is worked out in the narrative structure of the poem. The two lovers, Max and Katie, are parted; a selfish father and an evil force in the person of Alfred comes between them; Max is forced to overcome the evil in nature and man through his love for Katie before this love can be realized and the two lovers attain a paradisaal innocence at the end.

I would not change these wild and rocking woods,  
 Dotted by little homes of unbarked trees,  
 Where dwell the fleers, from the waves of want  
 For the smooth sward of selfish Eden bowers,  
 Nor — Max for Adam, if I know my mind.

The emphasis here is on the return to a higher state of innocence from a fallen world, which necessitates the completion of the circle and the total assimilation, or knowledge, of evil; the mythological rebirth after the apocalypse into a yet higher state of innocence; the power, through knowledge of evil, to overcome that evil and pass beyond it, as in the poem "Who sees a Vision":

Who sees a vision foul and dim  
Hath seen the naked shade of sin;  
And say its grim masque closeth  
When morn himself discloseth  
Thy soul hath seen the colour  
The anguish and the dolor,  
Of her whom thou hast haply only seen  
In fair attire and feasted as a queen;  
But now thou dost her know,  
She may not fool thee so  
Sin may not ever be  
Again a queen to thee.

This vision of triumphing over evil through knowledge and assimilation of evil, and through the ritualistic process of death/rebirth (as in “Malcolm’s Katie” when Max is struck by the falling tree), points toward the “apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion”<sup>11</sup> — revelation. This is a vision which Reaney believes will help to “translate our still mysterious melancholy dominion into the releasing . . . dominion of poetry.”<sup>12</sup>

That Isabella Valancy Crawford’s poetry is not ultimately successful is, in this context, irrelevant. What is important is that she tried to develop a native mythology and, in her own understanding that Eternity may only be glimpsed through the transcendent power of love, through the perfect moment of assimilation in the lily-bed, — and in showing God as a life-force (fire) in a humanized nature, she has largely complied with what Frye considers to be the essentials of a mythology — “Every developed mythology tends to complete itself, to outline an entire universe in which the ‘gods’ represent the whole of nature in humanized form, and at the same time show in perspective man’s origin, his destiny, the limits of his power, and the extension of his hopes and desires.”<sup>13</sup> Jung states that the “union of opposites on a higher level of consciousness is not a rational thing, nor is it a matter of will; it is a process of psychic development that expresses itself in symbols.”<sup>14</sup> Isabella Valancy Crawford has understood this need for a unifying and identifying language of symbols as necessary to the development of a native culture and literature, — and this alone makes her an important literary figure in Canadian art.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, quoted by Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 625.



- <sup>2</sup> From C. G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, pp. 310-311, quoted by Campbell, *Ibid.*, p. 652.
- <sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 33.
- <sup>4</sup> James Reaney, "Isabella Valancy Crawford", in *Our Living Tradition*, ed. R. L. McDougall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), p. 278.
- <sup>5</sup> Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- <sup>6</sup> All quotations of Isabella Valancy Crawford's poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems*, Edited by J. W. Garvin (Toronto: William Briggs, 1905).
- <sup>7</sup> Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 99.
- <sup>9</sup> Alan W. Watts, *The Two Hands of God: The Myths of Polarity* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 134.
- <sup>10</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 33.
- <sup>11</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 141.
- <sup>12</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
- <sup>13</sup> Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 32.
- <sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies* (Princeton University Press, 1967), Volume 13 of *The Collected Works*, Bollingen Series XX, p. 21.