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Patterns of Meaning: Isabella Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie"

Isabella Valancy Crawford's greatest work, "Malcolm's Katie," is a poem with many flaws; but these lapses in control and conception are somewhat overcome by the poet's ability to structure her work within interesting patterns which give the poem meaning and a lasting significance. In many respects, the narrative is a Victorian melodrama wherein the psychology of the characters is scarcely explored. Indeed, on one level, Max, the hero, is little more than a stereotype of nineteenth-century male virtue. He does, however, acquire interest when he is regarded as representing a philosophic or moral view of life. Clearly, Crawford has designed image patterns which give the poem resonance, texture, and metaphoric energy. Each pattern symbolizes a particular perspective on human life and aspiration. The drama, of course, results from the conflict between two antithetical approaches to life, love, and society. What follows is an attempt to clarify the patterns and to illustrate their thematic significance.

Basically, the conflict can be separated into three categories: 1) the philosophic conflict between idealistic optimism and cynical fatalism; 2) the spiritual conflict between a transcendental vision of a love-informed universe and existential nihilism which denies such a love; 3) the social conflict between a pioneering spirit of humane progress and creative labour, and the negative spirit of reactionary materialism and bourgeois immobility. All three conflicts enrich the central love triangle. Even there one notices the tension between the spiritual and married erotic love, on the one hand, and, on the other, the deracinating love of the flesh which destroys the spirit.

Part 1 of the poem begins significantly with the ritualistic exchange of rings. The ring, of course, symbolizes unity and the creative fusion of opposites, a ring which originally results from Max's labour. Symbolic identities for the characters are established in this part of the poem, and suggest that a purely literal analysis deprives the poem of its real beauty and value. Max is "the soldier of the axe," the pioneer and labourer who

must go out into the wilderness in order to win a home for his true love. Katie is "the perfect rose" whose "roots strike deep." The rose has traditionally been associated with spiritual perfection and has long been a cultural symbol in western civilization. One thinks, for example, of the rose windows of various Gothic cathedrals. Crawford returns to the rose for its symbolic value in other poems. Notable among them is the interesting "Roses in Madrid" with its highly suggestive last stanza:

Roses, roses, roses!
 Hear the tawny bull
 Thund'ring in the circus -
 Buy your arms full.
 Roses by the dozen!
 Roses by the score!
 Pelt the victor with them -
 Bull or toreador! (p. 94)

In another perhaps less successful poem, the image of the rose explicitly becomes identified as a symbolic power. The rose acquires a regenerative and exploratory reality by which man can come to terms with the spiritual life. Upon seeing the rose, man remembers "Love's first lingering kiss/And Grief's last lingering tears." The blind "should feel its yearning soul", and the deaf "(s)hould, on a sudden, almost hear a lark." Most importantly, the rose "(s)hould call him within the yew's bleak bound/Of Life, and not of Death" (p. 39).

Crawford is not always consistent or successful with the rose symbol as the poem "The Rose of a Nation's Thanks" so amply demonstrates; but it does not violate Crawford's artistry to regard Katie, "the perfect rose," in a somewhat symbolic light.

Katie's father is described in terms of the rock. "A rock is cup to many a crystal spring." The rock is both an image of endurance and strength as well as an image of stasis and spiritual aridity. Malcolm's actions have ended. He is now at rest and has taken his part in the post-pioneer society. "He has a voice in Council and in Church." Significantly, his achievements, which have transformed his fields into "ingots shaped like grains of wheat," have been the result of co-operation with his brother. His labour succeeded because the principle of pioneer sharing and love informed it. He represents on the social level what Max has yet to attain. "honest ease and fair esteem of men." Still, there is more than a hint of bourgeois self-satisfaction and spiritual immobility in Malcolm. He has failed to appreciate Max's virtue and manhood. Max, who recognizes the symbolic values of the pioneer family as "outspreading circles of increasing gold," also perceives that the initial pioneering spirit in Malcolm has been transformed into attitudes similar

to those of the landed gentry. He objects to Max's marriage with Kate because the man of the axe "owns naught else but some dim, dusky woods/In a far land."

The lovely Canoe song in the narrative reiterates the basic theme of love and unity as Max paddles his way towards the dark forest:

Above, below — O sweet surprise
To gladden happy lover's eyes!
No earth, no wave — all jewelled skies (p. 197).

Part I of the poem, therefore, introduces the positive sides of the central conflict: idealism, universal love, creative labour, and married erotic love. The latter aspect, of course, is merely suggested. Still, because of this love Max goes away. He does not leave merely because Katie's father disapproves of his interest in her.

Before looking at Part II, I think it would be useful at this point to illustrate Crawford's use of one other symbol in the narrative, the symbol of the colour of gold. As the poem progresses, the colour gold becomes more and more associated with the perfect rose. The perfect rose, of course, is embodied in Katie. Hence, gold acquires some connotation of universal love, purity, and harmony. In one of Crawford's more successful poems, "Said the Skylark," the image of gold emerges when a love union occurs. A caged bird sings of his love to a lovely cloud which descends after "his silvery song had sped/To her in days of old/In dawns of gold." The image of "dawns of gold" clearly implies a paradisaical vision of a pristine life of love. Significantly, this same cloud was at one time "Decked . . . with roses." Similarly, in her poem "Who Sees A Vision," Crawford equates a vision, obviously some kind of spiritual vision, with a "treasure of gold." In the poem "Said the Wind", a ship is beckoned by the wind in terms of love and gold: "'Come with me,' sang the Wind/'O Ship beloved, and find/How golden-glossed and blue/Is the sea.'" When Crawford is most explicit about the relationship between gold and the rose, the symbols of love and unity, her poetry is often least successful. I quote from "Love Amongst the Roses" only to provide another example of her very conscious choice of image patterns:

A rosy brake I see ahead,
In golden vapour flushing;
My steps are winged, and on I speed,
The fragrant fortress crushing.

The dewy petals flutter fast -
 The gap to me discloses,
 Asleep upon the damask blooms,
 Sweet Love amongst the Roses (p. 92).

The first several stanzas of Part II illustrate Crawford's genius for producing a highly metaphorical density that creates a very rich, almost luxuriant feeling about the texture of the wilderness. Her poetry is extremely tactile in the sense that it suggests the essential, physical quality of natural phenomena. This is not to say that she writes in a photographic manner; rather it does say that her metaphors are imbued with a sense of the personality of things. She creates, in effect, a Canadian mythology derived from conceiving the various phenomena of the wilderness in terms of Indian deities. She imbues the landscape with a tremendous sense of power and identity, a mythic timelessness and character which receives shape and purpose from the Indian, anthropomorphic spirits. We do not, however, have here a simple personification in terms of classical Olympians. For example, the wind is not Zephyr. The Indian myth expresses the texture and vibrancy of the forest. The wind retains its own identity; but such an identity can be comprehended by the human imagination only in terms of metaphor. Because the passage is so lengthily and densely metaphorical, one has a sense of an epic vision ranging over the Canadian wilderness. The various manifestations of the natural world are in confrontation, in violent agitation as the seasons and climates change. But the violence is only destructive insofar as destruction is the necessary prelude to regeneration. The natural world as myth of movement and cyclic change seems to be Crawford's special creation at this point. It is intensely alive and vital with an existence and importance enriched by the great urge to create and re-create.

The passages present a suitable emotional and symbolic introduction for Max's entry. His actions will also be violent as he attacks the trees; but they will also be actions of creation because, inspired by love, he seeks to create a home. What he has to destroy in order to re-create is the half-dead forest:

The pulseless forest, locked and interlocked
 So closely bough with bough and leaf with leaf,
 So serfed by its own wealth.....
its dim veins
 Beat with no life, its deep and dusky heart
 In a deep trance of shadow felt no throb
(P. 199).

The creative labourer with the symbolic axe must bring the gold of love into this dark world. Hence, a language of war arises to describe the actions. Max "like a victor" clears his "battlefield" and destroys the "King of Desolation." Thus, one comes to the famous daffodil image of which James Reaney writes so suggestively and poetically in *Our Living Tradition* (1959). I shall quote the passage and then quote from Reaney's essay because the latter has obviously influenced my own approach to Crawford's poetry:

And Max cared little for the blotted sun,
 And nothing for the startled, outshone stars;
 For love, once set within a lover's breast,
 Has its own sun, its own peculiar sky,
 All one great daffodil, on which do lie
 The sun, the moon, the stars, all seen at once
 And never setting, but all shining straight
 Into the faces of the trinity —
 The one beloved, the lover, and sweet love (p. 203).

The image of gold as symbolic of love once again emerges in the poem, along with the concept of the unifying power of love. Of this passage, Reaney has written:

In the beginning there was a huge daffodil which contained all reality, was all reality — its centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Crawford suggests that this daffodil apocalypse is possible whenever two human beings love each other (p. 276).

Katie is the beloved, Max the lover, and both operate within a great spiritual concept of love which makes creativity possible, optimism inevitable, idealism a natural product of such attitudes. One does not have to accept Reaney's apocalypse but one does, I think, have to accept the implications of the gold colour symbolism.

After the great daffodil image in this section of the poem comes a social history of the pioneer who escaped from the anti-golden world of Europe, "so stern, so dark, so drear!" — and came to transform the wilderness. Max's primary function is reiterated and is given an historical context and justification. Katie's identity as the human embodiment of the love principle is brought to mind once again by the use of gold. Katie's "sunny eyes" and "yellow hair" connect her with the meaning of Reaney's daffodil world. Hence, several lines celebrate the ability of love to endure and to create and to be an integral part of the universal process:

O Love will build his lily walls,
 And Love his pearly roof will rear
 On cloud, or land, or mist, or sea -
 Love's solid land is everywhere! (p. 206)

Part III of the poem introduces the opposing principles to Katie's and Max's world. The image of the rock, Malcolm, is once again described: "He loved to sit, grim, grey, and somewhat stern," words that recall the image of Europe as stern, dark, and drear. Malcolm is the successful pioneer; but his creativity has stopped. There is no hint of spiritual growth. Consequently, he remains an observer of life and not a participant. Perhaps Crawford's treatment of Malcolm is somewhat inconsistent. He waxes hot and cold on the issue of Alfred's courtship. Indeed, he even has a nightmare about the affair. His love for Katie is real; but his energy has all been sapped, and therein lies the difference between him and Max, the creative labourer, and Alfred, the active destroyer.

Alfred's first speech is more or less self-explanatory. Allowing for the fact that he is too closely related to the arch villains of Victorian melodrama, one can still regard his vision of life as an emotional, spiritual, and philosophic antithesis to Katie's and Max's. Alfred becomes associated with the half-dead forest. The image of "his walled mind" echoes the image of the locked and inter-locking boughs of the forest barring golden light. He denies the universality of love, its timelessness and its endurance. More importantly, he denies the principle of regeneration entirely:

Gone, long gone the days
 When Love within my soul forever stretched
 Fierce hands of flames, and here and there I found
 A blossom fitted for him, all up-filled
 With love as with clear dew: — they had their hour
 And burned to ashes with him as he drooped
 In his own ruby fires (p. 209).

The passion of human love has been supplanted in Alfred's heart and mind by the passion for material riches. He is a materialist in the deepest meaning of the word. Yet, ironically, he denies materialism. He denies everything except the acquisitions of the moment which last as long as the moment itself. His philosophy is a bleak one, based as it is upon a vision of human life in a black and empty and loveless universe. He despises real feeling and defines the ultimate gift to humanity as ceasing to be:

.....and now, O now I know
 There is no Immortality could give
 Such boon as this — to simply cease to be!
 There lies your Heaven, O ye dreaming slaves...(p. 210)

Understandably, Alfred is an atheist. In the context of the poem, his atheism means the denial of universal, creative love. He has a touch of the existentialist who responds to the given present rather than to an ideal future. Hence his love of gold is not the love of symbolic gold. He has neither the heart nor the insight to accept symbols:

My pangs of love for gold must needs be fed,
 And shall be, Katie, if I know my mind (p. 210).

Shortly after we meet the life-denying Alfred, Katie dances on Max's logs in the river. The dance is a symbolic celebration of life and love, and a demonstration of Katie's harmonious relationship with Max. Indeed, she almost becomes the symbol of love itself as her hair is transformed into a "flying wind of gold." The principle of destruction, however, which the reader first met in the mythic creation of the Canadian landscape and understood in Max's destruction of the trees, breaks into Katie's love dance. She slips and falls beneath the logs.

Ironically and yet quite logically, Alfred saves her. We know that he is a life-denying force; yet we also know that the success of his plans for the moment and the fulfillment of his materialist vision are based upon Katie's survival. Katie, the golden goddess of love, in a manner of speaking, is also responsible for attracting Alfred. In that moment, perhaps it is love that sends Alfred into the waters to save Katie. He himself seems to be driven to his action:

But Alfred, prone
 With pipe and book upon the shady marge
 Of the cool isle, saw all, and seeing hurled
 Himself, *and hardly knew it*. on the logs (p. 212).
 (italics are mine)

Katie is revived by being held "ever toward the sun," the source of creative golden light. Alfred seeks to make use of her gratitude to turn her indifference into love for him. Wedded already to the principle of unity, however, she remains faithful to Max.

Part IV of the poem introduces the landscape as myth once again, and the same theme of struggle is metaphorically presented. Like the landscape imagery of Part II, the image of the North Wind who "smote the tall reeds to the hardened earth" presents an emotional and

metaphorical framework for the forthcoming confrontation between Max and Alfred. We hear Max's great axe song wherein the axe is clearly defined as creator-destroyer. Max himself assumes the status of mythic hero in this section: "My axe and I, we do immortal tasks/We build up nations — this my axe and I". Hence, energy, creativity, idealism are all implied in the axe song. Of course, Alfred enters with his life-denying vision and his materialist view of human history. All the images of destruction that Alfred catalogues are not attended by the principle of regeneration. Nothing that is destroyed in Alfred's view is re-created. Nothing that dies is resurrected. Nothing that decays is revitalized. His vision is the counterpoint to Max's vision of human history and the role of the pioneer. We are therefore presented with images of the charnel house as Alfred details the insignificance and anti-creative perspective of the cynic and fatalist: "black clouds," "the black of deep oblivion," "black East," "mouldered thrones," and "sunless flint." One notices the anti-gold colour pattern. Here is a life bereft of love and gold, the perfect rose and the perfect union. Alfred's is a dark, earth-bound view that cannot rise above the historical fact of decay. Max, however, inspired by the golden love, insists that "All else is mortal but immortal — Love." We know, of course, Alfred's view of immortal love as the pitiful illusion of frightened slaves. Max, instinctively recognizing the alien quality of this strange intruder, symbolically suggests that Alfred get a Katie to "dispel the doubting darkness" of his soul.

Alfred attempts to shatter Reaney's great daffodil apocalypse and, for a moment, the principle of destruction seems to win over the principle of creative love. The tree that Max has been chopping topples over him as Alfred insists that Katie has been unfaithful. Perhaps, for a time, Max too has stepped out of the world of harmony beyond the influence of the perfect rose into Alfred's destructive sphere.

Alfred's soliloquy after the incident approaches a Shakespearian quality in its richness of image and psychological exploration. Momentarily, he even doubts himself, then decides to continue to be and believe what he has always been and believed. He deliberately hardens his heart against humane feeling and denies the principles of the golden world. He denies his culpability for the accident and lays the blame to "Blind Chance":

Life is too short for anguish and for hearts!
 So I wrestle with thee, giant, and my will
 Turns the thumb, and thou shalt take the knife! (p. 223)

Part V of the poem is introduced by the image of the Eagle seeking the pale dove, an obvious metaphor for the Alfred-Katie relationship. It does, however, reveal Alfred's intent and moral darkness, and the essential, non-regenerative violence of his vision of human life.

Katie, despite Alfred's conniving, does not succumb to the black vision. The image of the ring is echoed in the following lines:

For long ago love melted our two hearts,
And time has moulded those two hearts in one,
And he is true since I am faithful still (p. 228).

Because she has been so closely associated with the golden world, the world of love and harmony, she has, in effect, become the patron goddess of that world, the embodiment of the universality and immortality of love. Alfred proclaims violently against faith and love and identifies himself with death:

So Death and Flesh live on; immortal they!
I mean the blank-eyed queen whose wassail bowl
Is brimmed from Lethe, and whose porch is red
With poppies, as it waits the panting soul.
She, she alone is great! (p. 228)

The destruction-resurrection theme is emphasized in the opening lines of Part VI. The element of sorrow in human life is considered by Crawford to be an indispensable part of human growth and human love. The world of gold arises from the world of sorrow if the heart is willing and open to its richness. The basically Christian vision of Crawford's poetry here receives explicit description as love becomes identified with the Deity, the "Helper of the Universe," the "great Creative Hand." Alfred, of course, as an atheist is beyond the influence of Christian love although not beyond its redeeming spirit. The demon, however, must have the desire, the sincere desire, to repent in order to enter into the world of gold and divine grace. Significantly, after the image of the "Creative Hand" appears the description of the landscape as informed by the golden vision:

The Land had put his ruddy gauntlet on,
Of harvest gold, to dash in Famine's face; (p. 230).

Alfred, the demon-destroyer, realizes finally that Katie can love only Max, and that her eyes, filled with "promises of sun," shine with love for the creative, love-inspired pioneer.

When Alfred attempts to destroy Katie, he fails because love is life and regenerative. She is quite naturally saved by Max whose appearance on the scene, although technically a flaw, is symbolically apt. Both Max and Katie are part of the world of universal love, the world of energy and life and immortality. They cannot really be destroyed by the nihilistic Alfred. Their love is as superior to his hate as the sun's light is to the candle's glow. Alfred's ultimate illusion is that he could carry the principle of love to the grave with him. Even unto the last, he failed to perceive the transcendental quality of Katie's and Max's divinely oriented union. The fact that they name their son Alfred is a sign of their forgiveness of the man and also of his redemption. I confess that Alfred's redemption is somewhat abrupt and not artistically credible. The ending of the poem is thus weakened by the melodramatic plot structure. Still, the symbolic motifs of the poem remain consistent even at the end. The Edenic archetype makes an obvious appearance with this one distinction. The archetypal Eden is considered to be inferior to the new Eden in the new land because Adam's garden was exclusive. Max and Katie embrace the entire land. Imaginatively, their garden is a garden for humanity, realized in the love-transformed wilderness.

The patterns running through this work do not necessarily obscure the structural clumsiness nor the occasionally excessive diction. What they do emphasize, however, is Crawford's near-visionary imagination and her rather modern understanding of the moral and spiritual forces so much at work in the twentieth century. "Malcolm's Katie" remains a poem of valuable patterns which give meaning to the work itself and provide considerable insight into how an interesting artist perceived the world around her.

Notes

1. *The Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford*. J.W. Garvin, ed. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1905), pp. 193-235. All references will be to this edition. Unfortunately, James Reaney's recent edition of Crawford's poetry was not available during the writing of this article.