

## CRAWFORD AND THE INDIANS: ALLEGORY IN THE HELOT

*Robert Alan Burns*

In his discussion of mythopoeia in Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie*, Northrop Frye notes that the poet chooses Indian form for her myth, "taming the landscape imaginatively, as settlement tames it physically . . . deliberately re-establishing the broken link with Indian civilization."<sup>1</sup> While Frye's analogy may be somewhat mixed, his critical intuition is unerring. For the long mythopoeic passage, culminating with Katie's Max transfixed in the splendour of a prairie dawn, exhibits a synthesis of European and new world myths: The man is European; the perception is North American Indian. Animating the landscape with incredible imaginative energy, this synthesis grows out of a dialectical pattern which recurs through much of Crawford's major work, informing it structurally and thematically. Among the opposing elements in the dialectic are features of two mythologies, European and North American Indian: white and red. Colour, as well as form, is an important element in Crawford's imagery, an element utilized by the poet to delineate the character and significance of countervailing forces in her poetic dialectic.

An examination of colour imagery in Crawford's verse reveals a linking of the colour red with warmth, love, vitality, the sun, the earth, and red men, or North American Indians. White is often associated with cold, snow, death, the moon, and white men, or Europeans. Thematic interplay of these contrasting colours occurs in "The Camp of Souls," where Crawford evokes death and the realm of the dead in terms of "wintery moons," "a blanket of white" and "white frost" as "the paint of death."<sup>2</sup> Sharply contrasted with these images are the warm breath from the "red calumet" of The South Wind, "my red-browed mother" and the central conceit of the poem:

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1971), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup>Except as otherwise indicated in the text, all quotations from Crawford's work are from the reprint of her *Collected Poems* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

And love is a cord woven out of life,  
 And dyed in the red of the living heart;  
 And time is the hunter's rusty knife,  
 That cannot cut the red strands apart.

It is at this point that "the white man's hearth" is presented as a contrasting image to the red of the previous stanza, an extension of the basic pattern of alternation and contrast developed by Crawford throughout the poem. The ambiguous interrelationship of countervailing images is unresolved through the final stanza:

When the bright day laughs, or the wan night grieves,  
 Comes the dusky plumes of red "Singing Leaves".

Similar contrasts occur in *Malcolm's Katie*. In Part II of *Malcolm's Katie*, the approach of winter is described as a battle between the sun and the moon.<sup>3</sup> The sun, "the red hunter," has been "foiled" in his "prime" by the "keen two-bladed Moon. . .," whose "pale, sharp fingers" have denuded the trees of leaves. Personified as attacking an enemy, the rising sun chides "the white Moon. . .":

"Esa! esa! shame upon you, Pale Face!  
 Shame on you, Moon of Evil Witches!  
 Have you killed the happy, laughing Summer?"

Continuing his lyrical assault, the sun prophesies the return of Summer as Indian Summer, imagining the words of the personified season:

Dream of me, the mystic Indian Summer,  
 I who, slain by the Moon of Terror,  
 Can return across the path of Spirits  
 Bearing still my heart of love and fire,  
 Looking with my eyes of warmth and splendour. . .  
 I, the laughing Summer, am not turned  
 Into dry dust, whirling on the prairies,  
 Into red clay, crushed beneath the snowdrifts.

In *Malcolm's Katie*, as in "The Camp of Souls," cold, white, snow, and the moon suggest winter and death. Furthermore, the moon is specifically referred to as "Pale Face," an echo of the white man in "The Camp of Souls." Finally, in *Malcolm's Katie*, the earth itself

<sup>3</sup>See K. J. Hughs and B. Sproxton, "Malcolm's Katie: Images and Songs," *Canadian Literature*, No. 65 (Summer, 1975), pp. 55-64.

takes on the colour red as "red clay, crushed beneath the snowdrifts." The last image has pertinent allegorical ramifications, considering the overwhelming of the red man by the white in the nineteenth century, and through the use of colour imagery Crawford develops such allegorical possibilities emphatically in *The Helot*.

Crawford's manipulation of colour imagery in *The Helot* reinforces an allegorical dramatization of the historical pattern of Indian-white relations in Canada. The dominant colour motif is presented in the first stanza:

Low the sun beat on the land,  
Red on vine and plain and wood;  
With the wine-cup in his hand,  
Vast the Helot herdsman stood.

The landscape is washed in the red of the sunset, as is the Helot and his wine-cup, presumably filled with red wine. As the poem develops, the reader discovers that the Helot has been given the wine by his Spartan master, just as Indians were debauched by white whiskey and rum traders. In the second and third stanzas, the Helot is contrasted with his enemies, the Spartans. Although bound by subservience to his cruel masters, he still enjoys "the strength his fathers knew" when they had courageously faced their enemies. This strength comes from Mother Earth, a universal figure in American Indian religions:

Still the constant womb of Earth  
Blindly moulded all her part,  
As when to a lordly birth  
Achean freeman left her heart.

Continuing the expansion of the Earth-as-Mother image, Crawford characterizes the mother as "insensate," bearing "Godly sons for Helot graves." Furthermore, the Earth Mother is "god-mocked," smiling "on her sons of clay." Lest the reader forget the colour of the earth, the clay, and consequently the sons, the first stanza is now repeated, and the dominant red colour motif recurs through eight of the next ten stanzas. The Helot's fingers grasping the wine-cup are compared to "gnarled roots" clasping "Some red boulder" in the "red slant of the day." The day is "Fevered with the wine of light." At first glance the red of the grape and the wine may seem contradictory to Crawford's general use of the red motif; however, if

we remember that wine is a product of the earth traditionally connected with blood and life, then the contradiction becomes a dramatic irony, particularly when considered in the light of the destructive effects of alcohol on the aboriginal population of Canada, for whom the wine has a powerful attraction: "Fierce the dry lips of earth / Quaffed the Bacchic soul." Bacchus, of course, is a classical deity, associated, as is wine, with European culture. The Earth, as mother of the red man, becomes in her thirst the mythic counterpart of her children.

With the introduction of the "Sapphire-breasted Bacchic priest," the reader is put in mind of the Jesuit missionaries who provided early religious sanction for French exploration and the fur trade. While no one would accuse the missionaries of debauching the Indians with drink, there is no question that the erosion of Indian culture effected by the Jesuits increased Indian dependency and vulnerability. Wine, rum, and whiskey were supplied by the fur traders, a tactic calculated to increase Indian dependency and enhance the dwindling supply of furs. Moreover, Crawford's introduction of "the Bacchic Priest" ironically adds a sacramental dimension to the wine, calling Brébeuf's keg to mind. Bacchus, the god of the Europeans, supplants the native gods, an event followed by seven stanzas describing a frenzied bacchanal, as though filmed through a red lens. Extending the ironic application of the red colour motif from the wine to its personification in Bacchus, Crawford modulates the colour red through five of the seven stanzas:

Red, the arches of his feet. . .

While red Bacchus held his state. . .

Strife crouched red-eye in the vine. . .

Red the light on plain and woods. . .

Once the effects of the wine have been catalogued, Crawford dramatizes the debauching of the Helot by the Spartan. Described as "cold" and "thin-lipped," the Spartan is an appropriate counterpart to the nineteenth-century British Canadian, the sort who sent his sons to colleges modelled on British public schools, environments in which the Spartan virtues were practiced assiduously in order to produce sturdy young expanders of empire. In the poem, the "haughty" Spartan forces wine on the Helot in order that the

Spartan's son, Hermos, may witness the effects of drunkenness in the slave:

"Drink, until the Helot clod  
Feels within him subtly bred  
Kinship to the drunken god. . .

Till the god within thee lies  
Trampled by the earth-born-brute. . .

"Helot, drink, nor spare the wine;  
Drain the deep, the maddening bowl;  
Flesh and sinews, slave, are mine,  
Now I claim thy Helot soul!"

As the Helot develops his sense of kinship with "the drunken god," his own god is trampled within him. At this point the historical analogues become compellingly vivid, as with clinical attention the Spartan instructs his son in the effects of the mixture of wine and aboriginal flesh. The child Hermos, described as "silver-like" and "rose-white," looks on:

"Thou, my Hermos, turn thine eyes"  
(God-touched still their frank, bold blue)  
"On the Helot; mark the rise  
Of the Bacchic riot through

"Knotted vein and surging breast  
Mark the wild, insensate mirth,  
Godward boast, the drivelling jest,  
Till he grovel to the earth!"

The Spartan's justification is the nineteenth-century social Darwinist cliché: "His the might — hence his the right." Indeed, the cliché is ironic in light of the Indian's fortuitous vulnerability to alcohol — a standard European trade staple, inexpensive, easily transported, and, once the dimensions of native demand had been assayed, readily inflated in value. The identification of liquor as a means to imperialist ends is emphatic:

"Lo, the magic cup!  
Watch the frothing Helot rave!  
As great buildings labour up  
From the corpse of slaughtered slave. . .

A similar radical characterization of nineteenth-century imperialism occurs in Part I of *Malcolm's Katie* when Max condemns "Commerce":

Or Commerce, with her housewife foot upon  
Colossal bridge of slaughtered savages,  
The Cross laid on her brawny shoulder, and  
In one sly, mighty hand her reeking sword,  
And in the other all the woven cheats  
From her dishonest looms.

Here, as in *The Helot*, the involvement of the church in the economic expansion of empire is clearly indicated.

Another reference to empire-building at the expense of aboriginal populations manifests itself in Crawford's use of religious imagery and the Christian myth in *Hugh and Ion*. In Section IV, Hugh, the Métis protagonist, grows aware of "The infant city nursing on the breast / Of unhewn woods," finding its "virile voice to shout / The cry of eighteen hundred years ago."<sup>4</sup>

"Loose us Barabbas!—he will rear us high;  
Will lay his gold upon our organ pipes;  
Will beat his stolen silver in our bells;  
And stain our windows with the blood he robs  
From the free Helot's heart. . ."

The blood of the free Helot in this context is clearly the blood of the free natives of the North American wilderness, those still unmanacled by the developing commercial and industrial economy, represented in *Hugh and Ion* by the allegorical figure of Barabbas. In order to escape from the encroachment of urban-industrial Canada, Hugh abandons the city for the wilderness, where he hopes to establish a utopian community. Crawford's description of Hugh's awakening echoes the image of the "gyved" slave in *The Helot*:

The primal savage in him shook his gyves  
And stir'd great shoulders in his narrow cell  
And star'd with lusty looks about the earth  
And like a hawk peer's up the very sky  
For quarry. . .

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<sup>4</sup>Isabella Valancy Crawford, *Hugh and Ion*, ed. Glenn Clever (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977), pp. 6, 10.

In *The Helot* the images of the gyves, blood as wealth, and cities out of flesh come together to point the allegory:

Bruteward lash and Helots, hold  
 Brain and soul and clay in gyves  
 Coin their blood and sweat in gold,  
 Build thy cities on their lives, —

While we must agree with Robin Mathews that nation-building is one of the themes in Crawford's work,<sup>5</sup> it is only one of many, a theme ironically counterbalanced by Crawford's awareness of the destruction of the Canadian wilderness and its original inhabitants. The objection may well be raised that Crawford presents; she does not editorialize. However attractive such a notion may seem to modern critics, the weight of the evidence indicates that social commentary is a characteristic element in Crawford's work. While the poet may have celebrated the expansion of the Canadian nation, she mourned the passing of the forests and of those whose homes, communities, and lives were sacrificed. If we may take the Helot as an allegorical representation of the North American Indian, and if we may construe the cruel Spartan as a nineteenth-century British Canadian, then a poem usually dismissed as a melodramatic temperance tract quickens with the immediacy of contemporary moral and political analogues and becomes transmuted in the alembic of creative indignation into a passionate indictment of genocide. At the very least, *The Helot* represents one phase in a complex, often violent and contradictory dialectic, a process of mythic transmutation from which the figures of Katie's Max and the Métis Hugh emerge, evincing a new synthesis of European and North American Indian traditions.

On August 19, 1874 a poem of Crawford's entitled "The Roman Rose Seller" appeared in the *Toronto Mail*. In this poem the Helot and the red colour motif recur:

Helot here—  
 I give thee this last blossom: a bee as red  
 As Hyla's golden toilers sucked its sweets. . .

<sup>5</sup>See Robin Mathews, "Malcolm's Katie: Love, Wealth, and Nation Building," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2 (Winter 1977), 49-60.

Poor slave, methinks  
A bough of cypress were as gay a gift, and yet  
It hath some beauty left! a little scarlet. . .

For the Helot, then, a final, shabby scrap of life, symbolized in the rose, soon to be exchanged for the cypress bough of death. A fitting punctuation point.

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