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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Isabella Valancy
Crawford and
*"The Fleshly School
of Poetry"*



The sexual symbolism in "The Lily Bed," one of the best-known poems by the Canadian writer Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850-1887), has been noted by several of the writer's more recent critics. Thus, James Reaney suggests that the thrusting of a "cedar paddle, scented, red" into a bed of water lilies is a figure that "Solomon might have borrowed for his canticles."¹ Reaney also comments upon the fusion of "eros and cosmos"² in the piece, indicating the mythological and metaphysical significance of Crawford's erotic imagery:

. . . at the age of twenty I pencilled ♂ and ♀
[by] . . . [two lines of "The Lily Bed"]: by this
I don't just mean male and female, but Mars and
Venus. Her [i.e. Crawford's] universe has levels
that reflect each other from the Queen of
Heaven/Anima Mundi figure . . . to the red and
white lovers hermaphroditically reflecting each
other à la Phoenix and Turtle or Scudamour and
Amoret.³

Similarly, Frank Bessai delicately suggests that "The Lily Bed" is a "sexual idyll" "which depicts through gentle, loving motion a sense of peace and beauty, conveyed in imagery of union."⁴ While she does not specifically mention these sexual

connotations, Ann Yeoman does correctly observe that the experience rendered in Crawford's poem "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."⁵

There is accordingly a fairly general consensus among recent critics of "The Lily Bed" as to the poem's strong sexual overtones. The same readers have also offered some penetrating observations concerning the mythological/philosophical significance of Crawford's erotic symbolism. However, there is one further level of reference in the amatory images of "The Lily Bed" that seems to have escaped notice. This is an echoing of Robert Buchanan's sensational denunciation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in "The Fleshly School of Poetry. . . ."⁶ As part of his scathing attack upon Rossetti's supposed sensuality, Buchanan fancifully describes the poet's mind through the image of a stagnant pond choked with water lilies:

. . . the mind of Mr. Rossetti is like a glassy mere, broken only by the dive of some water-bird or the hum of winged insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness, with a light blue sky above it, sultry depths mirrored within it, and a surface so thickly sown with water-lilies that it retains its glassy smoothness even in the strongest wind.⁷

In "The Lily Bed" there are a number of striking parallels to the imagery of this passage. Thus, in Crawford's poem, the "glassy" stillness of Buchanan's "mere" becomes the "still crystal" of the bay, a mirror-smooth surface in which the surrounding forest is reflected. Just as the "glassy" calm of Buchanan's pond is broken only "by the dive of some water-bird of the hum of winged insects," so the "still crystal" of Crawford's inlet is disturbed by a dragonfly and an oriole:

Or when, a wizard swift and cold,
A dragon-fly beat out in gold

And jewels all the widening rings
Of waters singing to his wings;

Or, 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.

Corresponding to the "insufferable closeness" that "broods" above Buchanan's pond is the figure of "Stillness" who sits in a "lodge of leaves" with a "cone-spiced floor". Similarly, just as a "light blue" sky hangs above the "glassy mere" of Rossetti's mind, so in "The Lily Bed" a distant lake island "'tween blue and blue did melt" (L.37). However, the most obvious parallel between Buchanan's imagery and that of Crawford's poem is provided by the surface "thickly sown with water-lilies." Crawford's use of the latter symbol culminates in some of the most obviously erotic lines in her poem:

All lily-locked, all lily-locked,
His light bark in the blossoms rocked.

Their cool lips round the sharp prow sang,
Their soft clasp to the frail sides sprang,

With breast and lip they wove a bar.

Finally, in contrast with Buchanan's observation that the thickly strewn water lilies preserve the pond's calm even in the "strongest wind," Crawford introduces "Cool [evening] winds" which "Swept the locked lilies to and fro".

It is significant also that the seven imagistic parallels between "The Lily Bed" and "The Fleshly School . . ." appear in Crawford's poem in precisely the same order as they do in Buchanan's essay. When this striking correspondence is considered, it can hardly be doubted that the Canadian poet is deliberately echoing Buchanan's evocation of "the mind of Mr. Rossetti."

There is also supplementary evidence to indicate both Crawford's likely interest in "The Fleshly School . . .," and the availability of the essay to the poet. To review this material very briefly, Buchanan's piece was published in the October 1871 issue of the *Contemporary Review*.⁸ Its appearance initiated a hot-tempered controversy, the first phase of which persisted in various English journals until August of 1872. The quarrel was then revived in 1875, and led in 1876 to a well-publicized libel suit by Buchanan. Such a notorious squabble, involving both Rossetti himself and the famous Swinburne, seems unlikely to have escaped the attention of a person so keenly interested in literary matters as was Crawford. Certainly, "The Fleshly School . . ." itself appears to have been accessible to the poet. As Miss Katherine McCook of the Metropolitan Toronto Central Library has kindly informed me, "two important records still remaining . . . indicate that

Isabella Valancy Crawford could have handled [the October 1871 issue of the *Contemporary Review*"]:

Until 1883 the precursor of the Toronto Public Library, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, existed. We have its library's printed catalogue published in 1880, showing its holdings; in the "current periodicals" list appears *Contemporary Review* with an indication that the Institute's holdings were from Volume I (1866) to date. So the October 1871 issue must have been available. Unlike the public library it became, . . . the Mechanics' Institute was open to members only. Looking through the old registers, we found Isabella Valancy Crawford's signature in the membership register, entered on June 20, 1876. She therefore had access to the periodicals in the Institute and may well have read this one.

The June 20, 1876, date for Crawford's joining of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute is especially significant in two ways for the poet's apparent echoing of "The Fleshly School. . . ." Firstly, the date corresponds to that of the Buchanan libel hearing, which began on June 29, 1876. If news of the trial reached Crawford in the succeeding months, it could have prompted her to read or re-read "The Fleshly School" Secondly, the 1876 date seems to jibe with the fact that the first version of "The Lily Bed" was part of the long, unpublished poem *Hugh and Ion*.⁹ Crawford's references to urban ills in this piece indicate that it was written after her arrival in Toronto.¹⁰

The question remains as to Crawford's purpose in so carefully echoing Buchanan's review. Most obviously, the sensuous and elemental imagination of the Canadian writer must have been in profound sympathy with Rossetti's supposed "fleshliness." Thus, Crawford's poetry includes a good deal of sexual reference, an eroticism which is in keeping with her idealistic belief in the higher spiritual significance of the male-female relationship.¹¹ Such a faith in the transcendental value of sexuality is of course central to "The Lily Bed."

More specifically, Crawford's allusions to Buchanan seem designed as a rebuttal of a passage in "The Fleshly School . . ." that immediately precedes the sentences echoed in "The Lily Bed." Buchanan compares Rossetti's painting with his poetry, suggesting that both show a morbid and effete decadence:

There is the same thinness and transparence of design,
the same combination of the simple and the grotesque,
the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life,

the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to all agitating forces and agencies, all tumultuous griefs and sorrows, all the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation.¹²

The protagonist of "The Lily Bed" (whom we may identify as the skeptical nihilist Ion of Crawford's *Hugh and Ion*¹³) certainly has an experience of "exquisite sensuality." Both he and his creator display precisely the "superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints" that Buchanan finds so repellant in Rossetti. However, such sensuousness and sensitivity is in Ion's case an expression of "healthy forms of life" rather than a "morbid deviation" from them. Similarly, Crawford suggests through her beautiful description of the reflected forest that Ion's love is both "virile" and "tender":

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

And he had spoke his soul of love
With voice of eagle and of dove.

Of loud, strong pines his tongue was made;
His lips, soft blossoms in the shade,

That kissed her silver lips--her's cool
As lilies on his inmost pool--

Till now he stood, in triumph's rest,
His image painted in her breast.

This passage indicates that Ion does indeed temporarily escape from "agitating forces," "tumultuous griefs and sorrows," "the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation." However, the release of Crawford's protagonist from the *sturm und drang* so prominent elsewhere in *Hugh and Ion* does not involve a "weary wasting . . . sensuality." Rather, as Reaney and Yeoman suggest, Ion in "The Lily Bed" achieves a visionary atonement with the spiritual ground of being.

Moreover, both Ion and the villain Alfred from "Malcolm's Katie" show that Crawford does not consider an effete, sensual decadence to be the main spiritual danger facing her contem-

poraries. Rather, she sees their chief problem as a cynical intellectual nihilism which denies the spiritual forces of life and love in God's creation. In this context, a healthy sensuousness that stimulates the emotions and the imagination is anything but an evil. Rather, it provides an effective antidote to the current tendency towards denial and negation.

An understanding of the reference to Buchanan in "The Lily Bed" suggests both an added dimension of meaning in that fine poem, and also the literary sophistication of its author. Far from being a naive "primitive," Crawford in "The Lily Bed" addresses one of the major literary controversies of her day with a highly subtle irony.

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NOTES

1. James Reaney, "Isabella Valancy Crawford," in Robert L. McDougall, ed., *Our Living Tradition*, Second and Third Series (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1959), p. 282. All quotations from "The Lily Bed" are uniform with the text in James Reaney, ed., *Collected Poems: Isabella Valancy Crawford* (Toronto, 1972).

2. Reaney, *Collected Poems* . . . , p. xxi.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

4. Frank Bessai, "The Ambivalence of Love in the Poetry of Isabella Valancy Crawford," *Queen's Quarterly*, 77 (Winter 1970), p. 409.

5. Ann Yeoman, "Towards a Native Mythology . . .," *Canadian Literature*, 52 (Spring 1972), p. 41.

6. Robert Buchanan, "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti," *Contemporary Review*, XVIII (October 1871), pp. 334-350.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

8. For detailed accounts of the "fleshly school" controversy, upon which the following summary is based, see John A. Cassidy, "Robert Buchanan and the Fleshly Controversy,"

PMLA, LXVII, no. 2 (March 1952), pp. 65-93; and W. E. Freeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism: a Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 17-20.

9. For previous editorial and critical work upon this important poem, see Dorothy Livesay, "The Hunters Twain," *Canadian Literature*, 55 (Winter 1973), pp. 75-98; Mary F. Martin, "Another View of 'The Hunters Twain'," *Canadian Literature*, 71 (Winter 1976), pp. 111-112; and Glenn Clever, ed., *Hugh and Ion* (Ottawa, 1977).

10. Livesay, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

11. For this theme, see Reaney, "Isabella Valancy Crawford," pp. 276 and 282-284; and Bessai, *op.cit.*, p. 415.

12. Buchanan, *op.cit.*, pp. 336-337.

13. See Clever, *op.cit.*, pp. 19-22.