

*The Ecological Vision  
of Isabella Valancy Crawford:  
A Reading of "Malcolm's Katie"*

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THE LITERARY REPUTATION of Isabella Valancy Crawford has undergone profound transformation since the onset of literary nationalism and feminism in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Once labelled "a naive but original genius who wasted her talent writing polite album verses," Crawford has now become, in the words of Robert Alan Burns, "a poet of wide-ranging intellectual interests and remarkable accomplishment" (Burns 24-25). Critical opinion of that accomplishment has been fought largely on the battleground of her most complex poem, of which D. M. R. Bentley writes: "No long poem from nineteenth-century Canada has been so much discussed as Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie: A Love Story* (1884), and none has been surrounded by so much critical controversy. . . . *Malcolm's Katie* has not dwelt among the untrodden ways of Canadian literature but, on the contrary, has achieved through the praise, blame and scrutiny of critics and scholars a central place in the canon of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry" (Bentley xi). The appearance of Bentley's scholarly edition of the poem in 1987 invites a further phase of critical interest, particularly from feminist readers, for Bentley has pre-faced the volume with a reading of the poem that draws attention to feminist concerns.

Much of the critical controversy Bentley refers to has been provoked by the internal contradictions in *Malcolm's Katie*, contradictions which make a tricky business of determining the consistency of Crawford's vision. But many of those contradictions may be attributed to the era in which the poem was written, an

era characterized by intense debate about the emergence of women as social reformers and cultural critics. This paper is an attempt to set *Malcolm's Katie* within that particular historical context. But since my reading of the poem is necessarily mediated by my own historically conditioned frames of meaning and perception as a late twentieth-century feminist, I would like to begin by constructing a framework for interpreting the poem in terms of my deep concern for the future of our planet. Like many other feminist critics, I read women's texts as a rich source of alternatives to the dominant modes of perception — time-honoured habits of thought which continue to jeopardize that future.

One of the aspects of *Malcolm's Katie* that has always fascinated me is that it contains so many models of the relationship between humankind and nature. There are five such models, each of which is identified with one of the story's characters: the *commercial* model, represented by Malcolm, in which nature is ruthlessly and thoroughly subdued by man and turned into a profit-making enterprise; the *military* model, represented by Max, armed with his axe and engaged in guerrilla warfare with the landscape; the Darwinian, or *scientific*, model, represented by Alfred, in which nature is hostile and triumphantly destructive to man and the culture he creates; the *New Edenic* model, represented by Katie, in which nature and culture are reconciled and exist in harmony; and, finally, the most complex model of all, the one delivered to us by the narrator, in which the boundary between humankind and nature seems to disappear. In this final model, which I am labelling the *ecological* model, nature is presented to us as a culture in itself, represented by a community of mythic personae strongly influenced by Canadian aboriginal traditions. This ecological model transcends conventional Romantic conceptions of man's reconciliation with nature and the dualism which reconciliation implies; instead, it critiques hierarchical and dualistic ways of perceiving reality and suggests an alternative epistemology of knowledge based on equality and multiplicity.

Widely read in the discipline of philosophy, Crawford was — as many contemporary critics have demonstrated — aware of the dominant epistemologies of knowledge, epistemologies structured on the model of a dualistic universe. Indeed, Heraclitean and

Hegelian concepts have been used extensively to analyse the conflict of opposites in her work.<sup>2</sup> Some critics argue that Crawford reconciles herself to the Heraclitean *necessity* of conflict, while others maintain that the Hegelian *reconciliation* of conflict is central to her vision in *Malcolm's Katie*. Both arguments are sound and well supported by textual evidence; however, neither view accounts for the way in which the poem also threatens to subvert dualism altogether through an attempt to *decentre* the notion of conflict itself.

In her Introduction to *Romanticism and Feminism*, Anne K. Mellor writes that "the Romantic ego was both potently male, engaged in figurative battles of conquest and possession, and at the same time capable of incorporating into itself whatever attributes of the female it desires to possess" (Mellor 7). As a woman and a poet working within the Romantic tradition, Crawford was in a position to experience the way in which Romantic nature poetry achieves the reconciliation of man and nature at the expense of women in general and women poets in particular. The paradigm of Romantic poetry images the interaction between human moods and natural phenomena as a universal marriage between the male poet and nature — a coupling which depends upon identifying nature as both otherness and female, and subjectivity as male. Within this convention, the poet images himself as initially the child of Mother Nature; maturity means the gradual development of consciousness resulting in the ultimate separation of his identity from that of the mother. Fully differentiated from her, he now uses poetic language as a means of repossessing her.<sup>3</sup> This identification of men with language/culture and women with inarticulate nature is alluded to in *Malcolm's Katie*. For Katie, who is so surrounded by flower imagery that at times she seems to merge with the landscape, is also a woman of few words, while her menfolk are garrulous, often to the point of long-windedness: "words!" says Katie to Max in the opening lines of the poem, "only words! / You build them up that I may push them down" (l. 35-36).

Crawford's preoccupation with the conflict between man and nature must also be seen within the context of the early phase of nineteenth-century feminism, the period in which *Malcolm's Katie*

was written. As social reformers, women activists were critiquing industrialization, urbanization, and the abandonment of rural life, and they shared with many male reformers a "desire to re-create a cohesive, organic community bound together by an enveloping web of shared moral and social values" (Bacchi 10). *Malcolm's Katie* is clearly a celebration of that rural idyll, but it is also a utopian vision in that it reveals evidence of a desire to temper Victorian "progress," with its program of industrial and commercial expansion, through a uniquely female ethic of care and responsibility for nature. That concern is in keeping with a debate which figured prominently in the first wave of feminism, the debate over women's role as the arbiters of morality in a culture increasingly characterized by questionable marketplace ethics.<sup>4</sup>

The hierarchical and dualistic models of the relationship between culture and nature are those associated with the male characters. None of the three — the commercial, the military, the scientific — is the model which is established at the end of the poem. This suggests that Crawford has reservations about them, that each of the three has serious shortcomings. What they have in common is conflict between culture and nature. In the commercial and military models, nature is depicted as beaten into submission by culture as represented by Malcolm and Max. Malcolm and his male kinsfolk are depicted as dragging the ripping beak of the plough through the knotted soil (1.77) — a particularly violent image of rape when constructed by a woman who identifies with nature. In Max's model, the conflict between culture and nature is depicted in homicidal terms: Max is imaged as happily slaughtering trees, the monarchs of the forest. In both these models, culture is the oppressor while nature is the oppressed. In Alfred's Darwinian model the hierarchy is reversed: nature is the ultimate oppressor and human culture is the oppressed. Man's initial triumph over nature is only temporary; culture may win a few battles in its conflict with nature but nature wins the war.

The New Edenic model, which eventually wins out over the other three, differs from them in that it is not characterized by conflict and hierarchy. Nature and culture are depicted as complementary rather than opposed. This notion is of complementarity is effectively imaged in the final section of the poem, where the



"drooping vines" flourish on the "rude walls" of Max and Katie's humble cabin (7. 3-4). This modest homestead scene is remarkably unlike the vision that compelled Max to construct it, a vision articulated in his *Song of the Axe* and characterized by "Cities and palaces" that "furnish forth the lives of kings" (4. 44, 42).

The New Edenic vision accords with the conventional Romantic notion of the reconciliation between man and nature, for Mother Nature — and hence the feminine — must be subdued and possessed in order for it to be realized. This is in keeping with the binary mode of thought that informs Romanticism; the reconciliation of conflicting opposites is only possible where opposition exists prior to it. For as Anne Mellor notes, despite the balance implicit in the notion of complementarity, the "dualism inherent in Western thought, whether conceived in terms of the Greek opposition between *techne*/*physis*, or the Cartesian mind/body split, or the Kantian subject/object, or the Hegelian dialectic of thesis/antithesis, or . . . the difference of male/female, enforced a cultural practice that could only produce the repression and exploitation of the Other, be it the other class, the other race, the other sex" (Mellor 5). Hence, paradoxically, the New Edenic model, for all its improvement upon the models characterized by conflict and hierarchy, must sacrifice the feminine in order to realize the goals of equality and complementarity.

Nevertheless, for several reasons I have identified Katie as central to the New Edenic vision. First, her association with the flower imagery in the poem makes her the site of reconciliation between humankind and nature. More important, as the New Eve she is a mediator of conflict. Part of Crawford's intention is to liberate women from their association with sin, death, and the amoral/immoral Eve of Genesis who created conflict between God and man, heaven and earth, transcendent and non-transcendent realms. Evidence for this project may be found in Katie's refusal to succumb to Alfred. Unlike her biblical counterpart, who cannot resist the serpent — the villain of Genesis — Katie is not even tempted by Alfred's considerable charms.<sup>5</sup> Creative rather than destructive, the spiritual force at work in her is love, an internalized principle, not an externalized, personalized deity. Except for one brief moment (to which I shall return), God

remains in His distant heaven and Katie, His ambassador on earth, carries out His work. Katie has the power to reconcile all the warring forces in the poem, namely, all the hostility that characterizes the male relationships. She is the still, moral centre of the poem, a kind of fixed signifier that defines all the floating signifiers that swirl around her. Hence she occupies the central position in the carefully constructed family tableau that closes the poem. There she sits, surrounded by her male entourage, Malcolm on one side with baby Alfred on his knee, Max on the other twisting a lock of her hair around his wrist.

As I have already suggested, the male-identified, conflict-laden conceptions of the culture-nature relationship are not entirely eliminated in the New Edenic model; they have been subsumed into it. This subsuming process begins in Part I of the poem where, as D. M. R. Bentley describes it, "Max begins and ends his discussion of pioneering by manifesting a certain amount of hostility to Katie's father, a self-made man who seems to him to be made of 'rock through all' and, moreover, to evince an idolatrous affection for the products of his farm." Bentley adds:

In Max's eyes . . . Malcolm's farm is a series of "Outspreading circles of increasing gold" in which the living (and Edenic) bounty of nature . . . has been transformed by an unloving, snobbish *homo economicus* into "ingots," "golden fleeces" and even golden calves. But in the central portions of his discussion, under pressure from Katie, Max arrives at a more charitable construal of Malcolm and, in the process, articulates his own, very positive understanding of pioneering. (Bentley xxxv)

Given that it is Katie who, with a few timely phrases, steers Max through his narrative on the various ways one can undertake the project of pioneering, I do not entirely share Bentley's certainty that the "positive understanding of pioneering" which Max articulates is his very own.

"He [Malcolm] worked for all" (I. 68), says Katie reprovingly, leading Max from his initial opinion of Malcolm as *homo economicus* and into his second take on Malcolm, where Malcolm and his kinsmen become Max's own predecessors as quasi-military types doing battle with nature:

"... I heard him tell  
 "How the first field upon his farm was ploughed. . . .  
 "O, such a battle! had we heard of serfs  
 "Driven to like hot conflict with the soil,  
 "Armies had march'd and navies swiftly sail'd  
 "To burst their gyves. . . ."

(5. 69-70, 81-84)

"Yet you said such fields / were all inglorious" (89-90), says Katie, thereby manoeuvring Max into an articulation of his image of himself as a soldier of the axe and, from there, into his explanation of how he differentiates his vision from the larger, imperialistic model, which is also characterized by militarism and commercialism. From there, he finally arrives in New Eden, whose central feature is the equal partnership of man and woman which is complemented in the final scene of the poem by the equal partnership of culture and nature. In short, true to her observation regarding words — that he "builds them up" so that she "may push them down" — Katie gives Max the appropriate cues and thereby succeeds in getting Max slowly to dissociate himself from all pioneering projects which have as their central feature the oppression and enslavement of nature and to identify himself with a vision characterized by cooperation and equality.

Significantly, it is only when Max is in the physical presence of Katie that he subscribes to that non-conflictual, non-hierarchical model. As we have already seen, he is so convincing in his description of it that Bentley is persuaded that it is Max's "very own." However, once Max has put distance between himself and Katie, he seems to escape her moral influence and reassociate himself with militarism, commercialism, and imperialism. Many critics, including Bentley, have struggled with the ambiguous references in Part II of the poem, where Max the soldier is cheerfully slaughtering nature, unaware that what he is partly making way for is the industrial and economic exploitation of nature.<sup>6</sup> The troubling image of the "smooth-coated men," who will eventually come and build "mills to crush the quartz," "mills to saw the great, wide-arm'd trees," and "mills to grind the singing stream of grain" is a startling image of nature quite literally being put through the mill (2. 230-35).

Part IV is even more explicit in its depiction of Max as at considerable distance from Katie's influence. It is here where Max makes a direct connection between his pioneering project and imperialism. Max is depicted as slaughtering nature to the tune of his *Song of the Axe*. But he is not making way just for commercial exploitation. The vision expressed in his song features not only kings and cities and palaces but also a nation which grows so tall that its imperial crown smites the very heavens (4. 48-50). This image of Christian sacrilege prefigures Max's invocation of Satan, whom Max calls upon to assist him in murdering Alfred. But it is God who answers and strikes a blow against the soldier of the axe. It seems appropriate that, for the first and last time, God should make an appearance at this point in the poem, for Katie is not only absent in the flesh, she is also absent in spirit. Max has lost his faith in her, God's ambassador on earth.

Before moving on to the final, ecological model of the nature-culture relationship, more needs to be said about this role of God's ambassador which is so different from Eve's role as the agent of Satan. Like the themes already discussed, Crawford's redemption of women from the curse of Eve is informed by the controversy over women's increasing participation in public affairs. What has been called "the cult of true womanhood" was the ideological source of the moral authority of women. As the "morally superior sex," women were to guide and uplift their more worldly menfolk and thus offset the hardening influence of business.<sup>7</sup> While this ideology legitimized women's perspectives on social issues such as temperance, prostitution, and other "purity" reforms, it also caught women in a double bind. For the ideology also dictated that women should perform their moral tasks quietly and inconspicuously. Determined to make their voices heard and influence the course of social change, women were nevertheless haunted by their own ambivalence about female power. That ambivalence was as ancient as it was pervasive. Indeed, was it not through abandoning the feminine qualities of docility and reticence that Eve brought about the Fall?

Central to the Fall as depicted in Genesis is Eve's move from passivity to activity. As long as she remains passive, Eve remains moral and paradise remains intact. Her move from passivity to

activity transforms her into an immoral creature because the act she undertakes is in defiance of God's moral law. Eve's action is to exert immoral influence on Adam. This association between immorality and female activity colours Katie's ambiguous portraiture. Crawford's heroine is both excessively feminine and exceedingly powerful.

Katie is quite possibly the most passive heroine in all of nineteenth-century Canadian literature and, in terms of her effect on the male characters in the poem, also the most influential. Paradoxically, by remaining passive, she persuades all the men to do her bidding. As if to make explicit the connection between female activity and disaster, Katie moves from passivity to activity only once, and the incident almost ends in death. The only act she performs in the poem is a foolish one: she goes for a walk on a logjam, falls into the river between the crashing logs, and is almost drowned. By rescuing Katie, Alfred gets his chance to set an evil plan in motion — his plan to ingratiate himself into the hearts of Katie and her father. In short, in addition to its function as a device for driving the plot forward, Katie's sole move from passivity to activity makes a direct link between female action and immorality.<sup>8</sup>

This one incident notwithstanding, Katie remains passive throughout the poem, and in doing so she exerts moral influence on all the men. For example, in Part I, Max asks her how she plans to influence Malcolm into foreswearing his hostility against Max and accepting him as a son-in-law. Katie answers: "I'll kiss him and keep still — that way is sure" (1. 133). And she is right, for like the silent and docile woman so revered by patriarchal culture, Katie remains passive and reticent on the subject of Max, and by the end of the poem Max and Malcolm are reconciled.

As if to emphasize this important link between female silence and moral consequence, the only time Katie breaks her feminine vow of silence she triggers a chain of events that almost ends in disaster. Throughout Alfred's first stage of wooing, Katie refuses to tell him that he has no chance of winning her. However, at the end of Part III she changes her mind and tells him "Nay" (3. 269). This articulation immediately catapults Alfred into action: he departs for Max's homestead and tells Max that Katie has

betrayed him. Max believes him, loses his faith, and calls upon Satan. A "voice from God" answers, a tree falls and pins Max to the ground, and Alfred leaves him to die. The implicit message of this chain of events seems to be that women should remain silent or risk influencing men into immoral acts against God.

Katie's most triumphant achievement occurs as a result of her heroic passivity. In the climax of Part VI, Alfred, finally convinced that he shall never win Katie's love, tells her that Max is dead. When she faints at his feet, he resolves to kill both himself and her, takes her in his arms, and leaps into the millrace. Miraculously, Max arrives in the nick of time and rescues Katie. The following passage occurs when Katie regains consciousness, just as Max is trying to decide whether or not to return to the millrace and rescue Alfred:

"O God!" said Max, as Katie's opening eyes  
Looked up to his, slow budding to a smile  
Of wonder and of bliss, "My Kate, my Kate!"  
She saw within his eyes a larger soul  
Than that light spirit that before she knew,  
And read the meaning of his glance and words.  
"Do as you will, my Max. I would not keep  
"You back with one light-falling finger-tip!"

(6.129-36)

First, what *is* the meaning of Max's glance and words? Indeed, what are his words? His words are: "O God! . . . My Kate, my Kate." In other words, Max is making an association between God and Katie, between divine and earthly love.<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to the implicitly sacrilegious way he had formulated love in Part II, as he "made pause to clear / His battle-field" of "the tangled dead" (2. 175-77). The smoke had risen from his bonfire of trees and blotted out the heavens — God's dwelling place. But

. . . Max car'd little for the blotted sun,  
And nothing for the start'd, 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 below'd, the lover, and sweet Love!

( 2. 182-90)

Max cares little for the sun and nothing for the stars, those constant reminders of the divine, because he has his own version of heaven, his "own peculiar sky," his own earthly trinity, consisting of himself and Katie and their love for each other. But now, having glimpsed the gates of hell and returned to the sphere of Katie's moral influence, he recognizes in her the reconciliation of sacred and profane love. And some twenty lines later, what he has said finally dawns on Katie: "My Max! O God was *that* his Katie's name?" (6. 154; emphasis added) she exclaims. This is a confusing line, one that to my knowledge no critic has attempted to interpret. However, the line may be read with the emphasis added, so that Kate actually means: "Are my name and God's synonymous in Max's mind?"<sup>10</sup> As the fourth and fifth lines of the passage suggest, Katie sees in Max's eyes a possible destiny for him but she decides to remain silent and not influence him for fear that she will only hold him back. In other words, instead of *actively* influencing his decision about whether to rescue Alfred or let him drown, she tells him, "Do as you will." Then she buries her face in the moss at his feet and stops her ears, refusing even to witness Max's decision. Allowing Max to make his own decision without interference from her is what differentiates Katie absolutely from Eve. Eve receives from the serpent a vision of a possible destiny, a vision in which she and Adam become as knowledgeable as God. Although she succeeds in influencing Adam to do what she wants for the purpose of moving him in the direction of that destiny, her action results in disaster. Conversely, Katie gets Max to do what she wants by refusing to act — by refusing to exert her influence. That is, of course, a paradox — the paradox of women's moral influence: the best way for a woman actively to exert moral influence is passively to do nothing.

Nineteenth-century feminists eventually resolved the paradox of women's moral authority — the double bind in which the cult of true womanhood had trapped them. They accepted the ideology's designation of women as the morally superior sex, settled on a

definition of passivity as relative, and went on to become activists—but not without considerable disagreement and dialogue among women and their critics about how much activity was appropriate to the “naturally” passive female sex.<sup>11</sup> Although fraught with the era’s ambivalence, *Malcolm’s Katie*, in its attempt to reconcile femininity and power, is a contribution to that dialogue.

Were it not for the mythological interludes that interrupt the love story in several places, *Malcolm’s Katie* would be merely a typical Victorian Romantic poem expressing late nineteenth-century post-Darwinian anxiety. For if we ignore what I am calling the ecological model of the culture-nature relationship, the vision expressed by the narrator of these interludes, the poem could be read as an attempt to resolve the conflict between Romantic Mother Nature, who never betrayed the heart that loved her, and Tennyson’s Darwinian nature, red in tooth and claw. We could then agree with Sandra Djwa that *Malcolm’s Katie* is part of the nineteenth-century literary effort “to adapt evolutionary theory to existing religious and social structures.” Djwa finds this “yoking of evolution and ethics” in the work of the Canadian male Romantics—the Confederation poets—and uses it to explain *Malcolm’s Katie* which, she claims, “places the whole struggle for survival in the human and natural world within God’s hand” (Djwa 49). But while Djwa’s theory of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry is an eminently useful one, I believe it is somewhat reductive when applied to Crawford’s work.

In the long lyrical passages depicting the changing of the seasons in terms of Canadian aboriginal mythology, each of the elements in nature is personified as a mythological figure, invested with subjectivity, and imaged as caught up in a web of creative relationships with all the other elements. This web both mirrors and magnifies the web of human relationships in the love story. In addition to their function as a device for managing time and space, these mythological interludes inscribe an altered perception of the relationship between time and eternity, motion and stasis, process and teleology—those binary opposites which Djwa implicitly identifies with Darwinism and Christianity. The male poets were trying to live out the split demanded of them by evolution and Christian ethics, a split mirroring the dualism of soul and body. But they



were also structuring their vision on the model of one man's relationship with one woman — a subject-object relationship between male poet and inarticulate, unconscious, amoral Mother Nature — while Crawford was substituting a model of the whole human community's relationship with the natural community. Moreover, because of the subjectivity with which she invests nature the alienation between those two realms begins to break down and the definition of what is articulate, conscious, and moral (and therefore human) and what is not is thrown into question. For Crawford's personifications of nature are more than mere human projections. They are not merely Romantic personifications which encroach on nature by giving a familiar human face to its alienness.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Crawford subverts that Romantic convention by revising it for her own purpose of envisioning a radically different attitude toward nature, an attitude described by Nobel prize-winning scientist Barbara McClintock as "a feeling for the organism" — a way of allowing nature to enter human consciousness and explain itself on its own terms.<sup>13</sup>

Crawford's vision constitutes an alternative epistemology of nature which does away with the identification of nature as female and culture as male, and with the hierarchical and oppositional dualism upon which those identifications depend. The personification of nature as a multiplicity of female and male figures suggests that nature cannot be reduced to the qualities associated exclusively with the female gender. What we regard as male principles also seem to be operative in nature. Moreover, nature is too complex, too multi-faceted, to be confined to one metaphor and its variations — namely, the metaphor of Mother Nature. Even Katie, who represents a concept of nature which in spite of its ethic of reconciliation is still tied to Christian and Romantic notions of nature, acknowledges that multiplicity when she refers to the "wild woods and plains" as "bounteous mothers" — plural (7. 31-32). The narrator's vision enlarges Katie's by presenting us with a whole community of metaphors that only just begins to express the endless variety in nature.

Crawford's metaphor of nature as a culture is, I think, an effective way of conveying the fact that human culture is merely an extension of the natural world. For culture is not separate from

nature and opposed to it. For example, when Jane Goodall first travelled to the Gombe Reserve in Africa to search for chimpanzees in nature, what she found were chimpanzees in culture — chimpanzee culture, that is. Similarly, at the heart of human culture are human beings, organic creatures, and every cultural artefact is an extension of nature. One cannot build a house or publish a book without trees; houses and books are trees in another form. Hence Max's homicidal conflict with the "monarchs of the forest" may be read as a denial of his utter dependency upon them. His self-stylization as soldier of the axe artificially inflates his heroicism, for primitive as an axe may be, his "enemy army" has no comparable arms with which to defend itself. Indeed, the lyrical passage that opens Part IV offers a critique of this kind of militaristic egotism. The personified North Wind rushes "with war-cry" and wrestles with "the giants of the woods" (4. 1-2) but his inflated self-importance is punctured when he realizes that he will be mocked and his bravery belittled for slaying the defenseless: "sick rivers" already "in the cold throngs of death" and "swooning plains, / Bright with the paint of death — and lean and bare" (4. 28-30). But at least the North Wind has the grace to be "troubl'd in his soul" by such self-aggrandizement (4. 15). Not so Max. It is therefore fitting — quite literally, poetic justice — that one of his mislabelled "enemies" should strike back at him on his own terms and almost kill him, and that several of these enemies, reduced to commodities and marked "MG" — Max's initials as well as Malcolm's — should mount a similar counterattack against Max's beloved.

Alfred's Darwinian model is similarly undermined by the narrator's. In the interaction between human culture and the natural realm, Alfred recognizes only death-dealing conflict between subject and object, while the narrator of the mythological passages articulates meaningful interaction within a community of subjects, interaction which drives the ongoing process of birth. For example, Part II opens with a long passage in which the personified Sun reproaches "the Moon of Falling Leaves" for trying to kill "the happy, laughing Summer." But the Sun mockingly points out that Summer is not really killed; she has only "gone a little way before" and "will return again" to kiss her "children" to sleep and remind

these species of vegetation that she is "still the mother of sweet flowers" and that they should smile in their "heart-seeds / At the spirit words of Indian Summer" (2. 110-45). This allusion to the seeds of rebirth and renewal places the emphasis on species rather than individuals and suggests that death is meaningless unless perceived as a phase of transformation.

While this philosophy may not be news from the point of view of the late twentieth century, what is still radical about this passage and alien to contemporary dualistic habits of thought is the way in which its construction mimics the process of intersubjectivity. The Sun does not address the Moon entirely in his own voice, but rather, enters into Summer's subjectivity, speaking from her perspective and quoting her directly and at length. What we see, in effect, is the female poet taking on the subjectivity of the ungendered narrator, who in turn takes on the subjectivity of the masculine personified Sun, who in turn takes on the subjectivity of the feminine personified Summer. This constellation of variously gendered subjectivities, each contained within the other as the fetus is contained within the womb, is an image of all life on earth as mutually created and interdependently creative subjects. Regardless of gender designation, each entity has the power to contain and constitute the being of the others, much as a mother contains and constitutes the being of her offspring. In this variation on the theme of organic process, the emphasis is on mutually life-enhancing, intimate connection rather than dialectically achieved balance between the remote polarities of life and death.

A poem that denies the validity of dichotomies such as male/female, culture/nature, subject/object is necessarily paradoxical, for there is no Archimedean point outside the binary structures of gendered language from which to speak. Crawford has no choice but to use gendered metaphors to convey a perception of reality that does not artificially cleave it into two unequal and incomplete parts. Nor can I, in my attempt to reconstitute Crawford's vision, tell my story in a language uncorrupted by false dichotomies. I have chosen to explicate the narrator's introductory passage in Part II in terms of the complex womb imagery which Crawford's construction of it suggests to me because, unlike John Ower, who turns Max's axe into a kind of Lacanian transcendental signifier,

I see the womb as the poem's controlling presence. This decentering of the phallus is in keeping with French feminist theory, which argues that in "order to undermine dualistic thought-modes and cultural systems, . . . the Other—the female—must be resituated, not in opposition but within. The woman must become not an object but a process, an opening up into the unconscious . . ." (Mellor 5). What better way to resituate women "within" than by designating the womb, with its connotations of "within," as central—not so much as a *symbol* of the feminine, or Romantic Mother Nature, but more importantly, as a *presence* signifying a process within which male and female are both engendered? The womb is a place of perpetual flux and transformation as well as a space within which the cultural constructs of masculine and feminine do not exist, for subject and object have no meaning there. Gender undifferentiated fetuses within the womb, like females and their fetuses, are related intersubjectively; subject-object differentiation is strictly an *ex utero* phenomenon.

The womb as an apt poetic metaphor for intersubjectivity and "an opening up into the unconscious" is in keeping with an experientially female psychological phenomenon, documented by psychologist Jessica Benjamin, in which desire is symbolized, not as the Freudian or Lacanian phallus but as a space, a place within the self from which female agency can emerge. As Benjamin has observed: "An important component of women's fantasy life centers around the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire, who recognizes it when it emerges of itself. This experience of inner space is in turn associated with the space between self and other" (Benjamin 96). In female fantasy, that space is the context in which one can be with others yet experience the most profound sense of self (Benjamin 92). In Crawford's textualized fantasy, that space is the con/text—the world of relationship, where the subjectivity of all life forms is acknowledged and nurtured. The poem as a con/textual space is—to borrow an image from the poem—the "*Dark matrix she, from which the human soul / Has its last birth*" (6. 2-3).

The image of the phallic axe may well signify the conflict of opposites, as Ower suggests, for Max does destroy in order to

create (Ower 36), but that image — indeed, the entire notion of creative-destructive opposition — is repeatedly overturned by the intersubjective vision inscribed in the poem. The image of the human community as contained within the biosphere of planet earth is a model of nature as a creative entity that holds destruction in its womb, where it is nurtured and transformed in nature's own creative image. This is at one remove from the traditional Romantic system of organic process because it is experientially rather than theoretically based; it is unconsciously experienced by the body rather than consciously perceived through the intellect. Moreover, the unconscious experience of the womb is one shared by all human beings and countless other species of life; the conventional Romantic "experience" of Mother Nature pales by comparison.

This privileging of perpetual creation over destruction questions not only the military model but also the scientism of Alfred's reading of Darwin, in which Alfred inappropriately transfers to human cultures what applies to species. His arrogant humanism does not permit him to see that nature is the *primary* creative process which makes possible the *secondary* process of culture. Instead, he pits the production of human cultural artifacts, such as cities and nations and technologies, against organic creation and then views culture's inability to compete as nature's denial of life. There is a kind of womb envy in this formulation — a sulky withdrawal from life because ("male") culture cannot usurp but can only modestly imitate ("female") nature's creative capability. Alfred's personification of death as a female figure is a classic case of projection. He displaces onto nature the culture-builder's own destructive impulses — impulses that reduce nature to an exploitable resource for producing lifeless cultural artifacts which, unlike nature's "artifacts," have no power to reproduce themselves organically. Hence nature, like the sex identified with it, is blamed for culture's relative impotence. Alfred interprets nature as the enemy, as does Max, albeit on a grander scale.

But if Alfred has set himself over against nature, Katie integrates him back into it. She names her new baby for Alfred, once a destructive villain but now a repentant and transformed man, whose death is neither confirmed nor denied at the end of the

poem. Hence his destruction is suspended and subsumed within the creation of his namesake. This allusion to cyclical process is mirrored in the mythological interludes, in which several deaths are presaged, only to be subsumed within successive rebirths.<sup>14</sup>

Creativity as primary and constant in the natural world is mirrored back at the level of the love story in Katie's constant and unshakable love for Max. D. M. R. Bentley interprets the tale in terms of Jean Kennard's analysis of women's domestic narratives structured on the two-suitors convention. There are, however, profound differences between those narratives and *Malcolm's Katie*. In the novels Kennard examines, the heroine comes to maturity when she realizes that she has been mistaken in her preference for the "wrong" suitor. She is made to see that it is the hero who has the "correct" interpretation of events and is therefore the "right" suitor. Not so Katie. From the beginning her view of things is the "right" one, and sooner or later all the male characters are brought within her perspective. Moreover, the story of "Malcolm's Katie" does not end in betrothal; it begins with it and moves beyond, into the story of "Katie's Alfred," whose infant presence in Part VII signifies a new beginning, which undermines the closure toward which the narrative has been moving. Hence, even the New Edenic model, whose reconciliation with the forces of militarism, commercialism, and scientism rationalizes those models and narcotizes us against their ethic of domination, is superseded by the larger vision.

As the suspension of closure implies, the story does not so much "end" as shift into another dimension, suggested by the family tableau and the stasis which characterizes it. But this dimensional shift is not the conventional spatialization of time, but rather, a dynamization of space achieved through the introduction of baby Alfred and hence is in keeping with female desire as an intersubjective space within which all can emerge and grow. This space-time/stasis-motion conflation is not confined to Part VII: as the hectic male activity around Katie's relative passivity throughout the poem suggests,<sup>15</sup> time is to eternity as the womb is to the fetus; eternity and teleology are contained *within* time and process, not the reverse. In Crawford's cosmology, there is only the eternal

present — a dynamic space where all objects are subjects, where self and other meet in a web of intersubjective relationship.

Isabella Valancy Crawford introduced into Canadian poetry an alternative epistemology of knowledge — an experiential way of seeing and knowing the natural world; it is a kind of ecological vision which is, admittedly, fragmentary but nevertheless present in Crawford's poem. That vision is echoed in the poetry of later female Romantics, such as Marjorie Pickthall and Constance Lindsay Skinner,<sup>16</sup> and in the early modernist poems of Dorothy Livesay;<sup>17</sup> it also appears in Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a long poem which, like *Malcolm's Katie*, resists closure through a radical dynamization of space.<sup>18</sup> Hence Crawford's significance as a precursor of twentieth-century Canadian women poets can hardly be overstated. Most important, Crawford speaks to all readers who share a concern for the future of our culture, our species, our planet, and hence is eminently worthy of the ongoing critical dialogue which her poetry has inspired.

## NOTES

- 1 The author gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its assistance. She also wishes to thank Maria K. Eriksen for her support and encouragement.
- 2 See, for example, Burns, Jones, and Hughes and Sproxtton, but especially Ower, who deals extensively with the binary oppositions in the poem in terms of "a dialectical relationship between good and evil, spirit and matter, love and death, Fall and Redemption" (36).
- 3 See Homans for a detailed discussion of Romantic convention and the way in which it robs women of subjectivity, identifies them with amoral Eve and inarticulate Mother Nature, and hence denies the woman writer poetic identity.
- 4 See Cook and Mitchinson (224) and Houghton (351) on women's moral authority in Victorian culture. Women's moral superiority was at the heart of the Maternal Feminism of the period. This is reflected in *Malcolm's Katie* in the way in which Katie's dead mother periodically haunts Malcolm whenever he is about to barter Katie for a rich son-in-law.
- 5 As many Christian mythologizers would have it, Satan would have no power if he were not suave and attractive and persuasive. Hence, as many of *Malcolm's Katie's* critics have complained, Alfred's vision is the most convincing of all the myths of nature inscribed in the poem. But far from being a weakness in Crawford's argument against the narrowness of scientific logic, Alfred's vision exerts an irresistible temptation upon the reader which makes her/him all the more appreciative of Katie's easy resistance.
- 6 See Bentley (xxxvii-xxxix) for a discussion of this ambivalence which takes account of earlier critical efforts to deal with it.

- 7 See Welter for a discussion of the origin and content of the cult of true womanhood.
- 8 This scene is the one most used to condemn the poem as melodramatic. This alternative reading redeems the scene by demonstrating its crucial role in delineating Crawford's view of the perils of female "activity."
- 9 See Ower (35) for a discussion of the Platonic/Romantic/Christian view of the reconciliation of sacred and profane love as it is expressed in Crawford's work.
- 10 See Miller, who argues that "emphasis added" is a feminist reading strategy.
- 11 See Rosenberg (7-16) on Darwin's claim that women are more passive than men and on how nineteenth-century feminists chose to interpret Darwin for their own purposes.
- 12 Nor are these personifications an appropriation of the indigene in white Canadian culture, as Terry Goldie might argue, for Crawford does not stereotype native people through her use of native mythological figures. Indeed, by investing native figures with subjectivity she not only challenges the assumption of their "otherness," she also uses it to strengthen her argument for an epistemology of knowledge characterized by intersubjectivity.
- 13 See Keller's biography of McClintock in which she explains how she managed to look deeper and farther than her colleagues into the natural phenomena that were the "objects" of her scientific research. In effect, she regarded those objects as speaking subjects: "one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' Above all, one must have 'a feeling for the organism'" (198).
- 14 See, for example, Part II, the first mythological interlude (ll. 14, 76, and 95).
- 15 As D. M. R. Bentley writes, quoting Sara Jeanette Duncan, "Very much the 'painted pivot of [a] merry-go-round' . . . Katie sits at the centre of a turning world in which all the characters, sometimes almost as woodenly as Duncan's amusement-park metaphor suggests, move along lines long-established by convention" (Bentley xvi).
- 16 See Relke (1987, 1989) for accounts of Pickthall's and Skinner's alternative myths of nature, both of which inscribe the concept of intersubjectivity.
- 17 See Relke (1986) for an account of Livesay's ecological vision as it informs her earliest poetry.
- 18 See Relke (1983) for an account of the *Journals* in these terms.

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