Lines to Time: A Poem by V.Penelope Pelizzon

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Abstract

This essay explores a modern American poem—its verse form, imagery, diction, and rhythm, and, in particular, its cultural echoes, resonances, and overtones. I examine the poem's explicit invocation of Apelles and crow mythology, but I also show that the implicit context from which it arises, and the one that allows it to speak with the greatest fullness and power, is work that Shakespeare wrote or published between 1606 and 1609. This context allows us to see that, at the heart of the poem, lies the Shakespearean and Platonic analogy between the creation of children and the creation of intellectual work.

Nulla Dies Sine Linea

On my birthday

A crow guffaws, dirty man throwing the punch of his
one joke. And now, nearer, a murder

answers, chortling from the pale hill's brow.
From under my lashes' wings they stretch

clawed feet. There the unflappable years
perch and stare. When I squint, when I

grin, my new old face nearly hops
off my old new face. Considering what's flown,

what might yet fly, I lean my chin
on the palm where my half-cashed fortune lies.

V. Penelope Pelizzon

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And haven't I repeatedly discovered that the writing I care about most can be understood as letting death into the room?

- Cavell

Pelizzon's poetry is acquiring a reputation. Her poems have appeared widely in periodicals (the *Kenyon Review*, *Nation*, *Southern Review* and *FIELD*); her first book, *Nostos,*[i] won the Hollis Summers Prize and the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America; she's recently received a Lannan Foundation fellowship and an Amy Lowell travelling scholarship; and her second collection, *Whose Flesh is Flame, Whose Bone is Time* was published in the spring of 2014.[ii] Her work, however, has not been the subject of detailed commentary, and the appearance of a particularly striking poem, 'Nulla Dies Sine Linea'[iii] in *Whose Flesh is Flame*, presents an opportunity to rectify this deficiency and introduce her writing to a wider audience.

Like much of her work, this poem is unshowy, nimble, personal and expertly crafted. It is lightly constructed, yet the autumnal moment of insight it embodies has considerable emotional impact; it deftly mixes Apollonian reflection with the imagistic logic of dreams; and it is unselfconsciously informal while drawing deep on traditional forms and techniques. Above all, its powers of implication and suggestion give rise to a series of harmonics or overtones which enrich the spare textures on the page.

In this essay, I attempt a detailed demonstration of all the virtues described above, largely by showing that the poem's form, its topics (death, murder, age, crows, money, horrid laughter …) and the way its symbolism functions, can best be understood against a background of Jacobean literature. In particular, I follow up the poem's resonances with a cluster of work, mostly by Shakespeare, completed in 1606-9, and one modern work directly influenced by Shakespeare's output in this period.

Pelizzon's poem answers to this background in two ways. As a professor of literature,[iv] she can hardly be unaware of the works I discuss, and her use of their forms and techniques may well have been influenced by her literary experience. But the symbols I identify are readily comprehensible in their own right, and thus Pelizzon's use of them may sometimes count as the independent discovery of archetypes.

I

The title reproduces a remark which Pliny the Elder attributes to Apelles of Kos – one of the greatest painters of antiquity - who flourished in the 4th century BC. Literally, Apelles' words mean 'No day without a line' - he placed particular emphasis on the drawing of outlines - and it's natural to take the remark as meaning, 'the painter must practice every day'. Given the obsessional element in this injunction, it is no surprise to discover that Apelles also retouched his ostensibly finished works constantly; and when he was asked why he did so replied: 'I paint for eternity.' Ironically, none of his work survives.[v]

By quoting Apelles' remark as her title, Pelizzon makes it acquire additional significances. First, because his remark in this context can also be heard as describing a sad fact about life: after a certain age, it would seem, no day passes without nature adding a line to the face. Second, because one suspects she is thinking of the lines of her own craft as well as painting. There are vestigial precedents for the latter idea: in his autobiography,[vi] Trollope commends the painter's advice to young writers; and Apelles was considered the finest exponent of the allegorical and narrative realism so highly valued by Greco-Roman connoisseurs - a style most pithily and famously described in Horace's tag 'ut pictura poesis' ('as in painting so in poetry').[vii]

II

The first point we notice about 'Nulla Dies' is that it is sonnet-shaped; it has the structure and outline of a Shakespearean sonnet. Indeed, we can best think of it as a sonnet with every third line replaced by a blank line: if these were filled, it would have the requisite fourteen lines altogether. Most of the poem's lines have either five

stresses (like the majority of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*) or four stresses (like Sonnet 145). And just as the sonnet form naturally lends itself to the sonnet sequence, so 'Nulla Dies' finds its origin in Pelizzon's 110-poem sequence, much of it in this ten-line quasi-sonnet form, *The Monongahela Book of Hours*.[viii]

More importantly, the main structural units of the poem correspond with the main structural units - octet and sestet (incorporating a final couplet) – of a Shakespearean sonnet. In a poem of this kind, the *volta* or turn between the octet and sestet is marked by a new set of rhymes, but this change also generally indicates a shift in subject matter and approach. Because 'Nulla Dies' has no rhyme scheme, the turn has to be indicated by a changed approach alone, but we nonetheless find it at roughly the points where we would expect to find the turn in a Shakespearean sonnet.

In Pelizzon's poem, line 9 of the corresponding sonnet is missing, and thus the *volta* (a highly appropriate word in this context) has to occur either a little earlier or a little later. In fact, it occurs half a line too early in line 6 (the implied sonnet's line 8) at the beginning of the sentence, 'When I squint, when I / grin.' Significantly, this is the first use of the first-person pronoun; the first time the self is mentioned and acknowledged. It is also the first time the narrator performs intentional actions[ix] in the poem; hitherto, one has the impression of someone gripped by an appalling vision in which crows and years perform the actions, and the narrator only witnesses events or is acted upon. If the change from octet to sestet appears to occur half a line too early, then this is counterbalanced by the new subject matter of the final couplet arriving half a line too late. There is a pronounced change of content and imagery in the second half of line 9 and line 10; the implied sonnet's lines 13 and 14. The mention of chins, palms and half-cashed fortunes seems to have very little to do with the imagery of crows and flying which have dominated the poem hitherto.

These verbal step-changes mark the two most significant transition points in the graduated thought-processes underneath. The tri-partite sonnet form is well adapted to the development of an argument or structured series of reflections, and 'Nulla Dies' conforms to this generalization; but what makes this poem exceptional is that the very nature of the thinking process develops too.

During the first three lines, we have no reason to suppose that this is not just going to be a poem about crows: it is wholly concrete and perceptual; one could imagine it as an animated film. It is only when we reach the lines beginning 'From under my lashes' wings […]' that we realize that these crows must be metaphorical (since crows cannot literally emerge through the eyes); and this idea is confirmed when years are described as perching and staring. At this point we come to see that the opening crow-narrative is a form of involuntary Id-thinking, and that, like a nightmare, it takes place entirely in images. Indeed, the whole experience seems like the continuation of a dream, and hints that the self-examination in the mirror may be taking place on a dark early morning. We can still imagine 'From under my lashes' wings […]' as a surreal animation, but at 'years' the thought grows too abstract to be captured in images (one cannot draw a picture of a year as one can of a crow): now only an abstract concept will do, although the thought continues to be coloured by metaphors from the opening dream narrative.

The explicit introduction of the self and intentional action at the lines 'When I squint, when I grin […]' mark an important step-change, not only because the narrator is attaining a greater degree of self-awareness, but because she is also beginning to achieve some control over her circumstances. And despite the fact that what is shown by her squints and grins is discomforting, her actions show the damage is currently confined to a limited number of expressions which she can choose to use or not to use (even if her face still threatens to acquire a life of its own).

The narrator's ability to act continues into the final lines ('I lean my chin') but more importantly she can now engage in voluntary *thought* ('Considering what's flown') of the most abstract and advanced kind. She surveys the past ('what's flown'), and entertains modal thoughts about the future ('what might fly'), and it is no coincidence that this is the very capacity Hamlet mentions ('looking before and after'[x]) when he wants to illustrate the human capacity for abstract and 'god-like reason' (IV, iv, 40-1).[xi] The new cluster of imagery is therefore a surface manifestation of a seismic change in the poem's fundamental thought-processes, and the concluding lines, as in many of Shakespeare's final couplets, even achieve a hard-won if provisional philosophical overview.

Thus ‘Nulla Dies’ progresses from a nightmare vision of age to a more realistic and balanced assessment of what has been lost and what might still be gained - although the outlook is still pessimistic enough. But the poem also progresses from the most passive, primitive and symbolic kind of Id-thinking to the emergence of self-consciousness, action, and voluntary conceptual thought. In sum, it seems to pass from the world of the night to the world of the day.

The tradition of the abridged or amended sonnet is almost as long as the sonnet tradition itself: it goes back at least to Shakespeare’s own enigmatic 12-line Sonnet 126, and certainly takes in Larkin’s ‘Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel’ (14 lines but divided into 9 and 5),[xii] and Elizabeth Bishop’s late ‘Sonnet’ (with 14 lines but of half the usual length).[xiii] In these poems, however, the reference to the sonnet tradition is explicit; in Pelizzon’s case, the structural allusion seems entirely unconscious.[xiv]

Apelles’ art was thought in antiquity to be the most poetic kind of painting, and the sonnet form is often thought to be the most painterly kind of poem. ‘Since a sonnet resembles a rectangle of canvas,’ observe Edmondson and Wells, ‘it is possible for the reader’s eye to hold suspended words as shapes and shades within a single frame of reference and to consider the sonnet as a spatial, as well as literary, experience.’[xv] And they go on to point out that the form is particularly satisfying to the eye as well as the intellect: the golden section is the ration of 8:5, and the sonnet, which is divided into 8 and 6 (to allow for the final rhyme) is, of all poetic forms, the one that most nearly conforms to this ideal.[xvi]

III

Similarity of form can sometimes indicates similarity of content, and there are clear affinities between the preoccupations of Pelizzon’s poem and the preoccupations of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. For the time being, I shall point out nine points of similarity:

1) In both works, the topic of ageing, mortality and loss of beauty is central.

> When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
> And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
> Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
> Will be a tattered weed of small worth held. (S:2:1-4)[xvii]

> Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,
> Which used, lives th'executor to be. (S:4:13-14)

2) Shakespeare, like Pelizzon, explores the interconnection between lines on the face and lines on the page. In Sonnet 63, we find: 'When hours have drained his blood, and filled his brow / With lines and wrinkles […] / His beauty shall in these black lines be seen' (S:63:3-13). In Sonnet 19, Nature is enjoined to 'draw no lines' on the youth's fair brow 'with thine antique pen' (S:19:10); while in the previous sonnet, the youth is assured that death shall not brag 'thou wander'st in his shade / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st' (S:18:11-12).

3) For Shakespeare too, the crow is hostile to youthful beauty:

> That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,
> For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;
> The ornament of beauty is suspect,
> A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air.[xviii] (S:70:1-4)

4) Pelizzon's poem is about looking in a mirror, and the *Sonnets* make constant reference to this activity: 'Look in they glass, and tell the face thou viewest' (S:3:1); 'My glass shall not persuade me I am old' (S:22:1); 'But when my glass shows me myself indeed' (S:62:9); 'Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear' (S:77:1); 'Look in your glass, and there appears a face' (S:103:6).

5) Shakespeare contrasts a beautiful youthful face with a middle-aged face, 'beated and chopped with tanned antiquity' (S:62:10). Similarly, Pelizzon's mirror shows two

aspects of her own face: a ‘new old face’ and an ‘old new face,’ both phrases being variations on Shakespeare’s ‘old face new’ (S:27:12).

6) If we consider other famous poems about mirrors and ageing – the relevant stanzas from Byron’s *Don Juan,*[xix] Arnold’s ‘Growing Old’,[xx] ‘Hardy’s ‘I Look into my Glass’,[xxi] Larkin’s ‘Skin’ (*L,* p.44) – we see that they are exercised by the depredations time wreaks on the face, but are even more concerned with other physical and psychological signs of time’s passage. Byron primarily regrets the loss of vivid feeling; Arnold concurs; Hardy mourns the fact that his body and opportunities have wasted although his emotions have not; Larkin glumly acknowledges that he is going to age without having enjoyed the pleasures of youth. But Shakespeare and Pelizzon are unusual in being almost exclusively concerned with aesthetic damage to the face; they say virtually nothing about the additional kinds of physical and psychological decay which age brings with it. This is understandable enough in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* – he is largely concerned with someone else’s loss of beauty – but in Pelizzon’s poem it remains a conundrum to be explained.

7) In the poems by Byron, Arnold, Hardy and Larkin mentioned above, the poet was either old, or was a comparatively young man pretending or envisaging what it was like to be old. But in both Pelizzon and Shakespeare, the enemy is not so much old age as middle age: Pelizzon still has hopes for the future (she is concerned with ‘what might yet fly’ as well as ‘what’s flown’); Shakespeare is not primarily worried about decrepitude, but by the time ‘when forty winters shall besiege thy brow’ (S:2:1). It’s worth pointing out that Shakespeare was 44 when he completed his *Sonnets,*[xxii] the same age as Pelizzon when ‘Nulla Dies’ was published.

8) Apelles painted for eternity, and Pelizzon’s title invokes the theme of art and its power to transcend loss of beauty, ageing and mortality. The same issue animates the *Sonnets*:

> My spirit is thine, the better part of me;
> So then thou hast but lost the dregs of life,
> The prey of worms, my body being dead,
> The coward conquest of a wretch’s knife,

Too base of thee to be remembered:
The worth of that, is that which it contains,
And that is this, and this with thee remains. (S:74:8-14)

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (S:18:13-14)

The 'this' in the final lines of both sonnets means 'this poem' – or possibly 'these poems'.

9) For obvious reasons, writing poems involving mirrors gives rise to thoughts of visual images, and this in its turn leads to thoughts of painting, poetry and their interconnection. The same train of thought may well have made Pelizzon think of Apelles; and Sonnet 24, for example, explores the parallel between the two arts:

Mine eyes hath played the painter, and hath steeled
Thy beauty's form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
And perspective it is best painter's art. (S:24:1-4)

The poem ends, however, by hymning the superiority of poets to painters: 'They draw but what they see, know not the heart' (S:24:14).

IV

One stylistic trait all the pre-twenty-first century poems mentioned hitherto have in common – even Shakespeare's *Sonnets* - is that they are all primarily poems of statement, and their images play a largely supportive and illustrative role. What makes Pelizzon's poem stand out is the shadowy narrative about crows whose significance is never articulated or made explicit. Like a painting, the opening section of the poem *shows* rather than asserts: it thinks primarily with and through its images; and a major part of understanding it is working out what these images signify:

From under my lashes wings they stretch

clawed feet. There the unflappable years
Perch and stare. When I squint, when I

grin, my new old face nearly hops
off my old new face.

The story traced out in the imagery here seems to describe a kind of birth or hatching as the crows emerge awkwardly – wings and claws first - from the poet's eyes; this birthday is also a birth day. They cover her face when she forms a squint or grin, and then turn into a single new face which looks as though it might hop off the old one. This may be because the entire flock of crows forms a single face by tracing out the pattern of the poet's face before they all threaten to hop off together; or it may be that the crows, by some twist of dream-logic, all amalgamate into a single crow face which then threatens to hop off by itself.

What does this grotesque birth – or births - signify? Why should the crows emerge from her eyes? How can we explain the notion of an expression that becomes an additional face and seems as if it will hop off the original? What topics or anxieties are being explored here? In the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare offers us two compensations for age and mortality: the beauty and potential immortality offered by children; and the beauty and potential immortality offered by works of art. In the next nine sections, I shall argue that Pelizzon betrays anxiety about both issues.

V

'Nulla Dies' opens with a scene of humiliation. A solitary male crow – who may be real (at least in the fictionalized world of the poem) or simply conjured up by the narrator's face in the mirror – caws loudly. The narrator hears this as a guffaw. If the crow is real, then her sense of humiliation is projected onto nature; if he is imaginary, and imbued with her own intentionality,[xxiii] then he really could be laughing. Exactly what he's laughing at is not clear: it could be what's happening to her face, it could be the irony in the title, or both. In any case, his insult makes a difficult situation worse.

His laughter causes a flock of crows not only to answer, but apparently to emerge from her face and hurry to join in the public mockery.

This flock of crows has a dual function in the poem. First, they are, in some sense, the signs of age and decay, and there is something peculiarly upsetting about imaging one's face covered or replaced by a twitching, shifting flock of crows. The uniform smoothness of youthful skin is replaced by an off-puttingly complicated topography of stiff feathers and hard, shiny beaks and claws; and one's hitherto stable and controllable face suddenly seems as nervous, labile and refractory as a flock of birds, any part of which is capable of morphing and changing without warning from moment to moment. Second, the flock acts as a chorus which enjoys the humiliation of its unwilling host. As the chorus is also the problem, the more crows there are to enjoy the problem, the worse the problem is. The first role inevitably leads to the second: the narrator may feel contempt for the chorus, but they know that - by turning into a crow - she is destined to join them, and their mockery is enriched by this knowledge. In addition, both roles represent different aspects of the poet. It is clearly her physical face which is undergoing these unwelcome changes, and it is clearly her psyche which observes and feels humiliated by the changes taking place.

Why should the realities of middle age have made her think of crows rather than any other kind of bird? An obvious thought is that the poem exploits and expands the idiom 'crow's feet' – although this phrase never quite occurs in the text. But to explain why ordinary language found the *crow's* foot the most natural metaphor for these wrinkles, and why Pelizzon chooses to explore and develop the idiom, requires a little thought about crows themselves.

In reality, crows are some of the most intelligent and family-minded of birds, but their presence does not suggest youth, glamour or vigour: in appearance they are funereal and scruffy, their heads and beaks are bald and gaunt, they prey on the dead and eat rotten meat, their cry is harsh and unattractive, they tend to be solitary, they have large and obvious claws, and their flight is slow and measured. In myth and symbol, the presence of crows is rarely reassuring. Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, for instance, tells us that a crow 'symbolizes contention or discord,' and goes on to

list a number of idioms in which the word occurs, such as ‘Jim Crow’ (a renegade or turncoat), and ‘to eat crow’ (to be humiliated).[xxiv]

Pelizzon draws on all these associations but also re-inflects the archetype for her own purposes. Her most important contribution is that she makes her crows - in complete contravention of their stereotype - unthinkingly social and mediocre. The crow at the opening is described as a ‘dirty man’ (which immediately suggests the cliché of ‘dirty old man’), and the imagery - ‘throws the punch’ - suggests both a desire to hurt and a background of fuddled brawling. There are several further factors to his discredit: he laughs at his own joke; he only has one joke which he has presumably laughed at for many years; and this one joke involves him laughing – either directly or indirectly - at a woman’s misfortune. Guffawing is also a self-conscious, coarse and slightly brutal form of laughter: it is designed to draw attention to the guffawer and, in appropriate circumstances, to telegraph contempt to a victim; and people who enjoy guffawing tend to enjoy the physical act and its implications as much as they do the ostensible object of their amusement. This may be reflected in poem by the fact that the crow’s caw, which one naturally thinks of as the crow’s *response* to a joke, is here described as the joke itself.

Guffawing needs an audience, and this is found in the chortling chorus on the pale hill’s brow. Although Lewis Carroll invented the word ‘chortle’ to combine the senses of ‘chuckle’ and ‘snort’,[xxv] its meaning has gradually changed, and it now conveys a low, dove-like, rather self-satisfied form of communal laughter. The chortling’s unkindness is shown in the flock’s unseemly hurry to participate in a scene of public humiliation. Its lack of freshness or perceptiveness is shown when the crows chortle in response to the single crow’s joke, even though they must have heard it many times before, and they themselves have been condemned to repeat the same joke since time immemorial.

Both forms of crow-laughter incline to the mirthless and habitual; indeed, they can seem more like ungenerous general reflexes than amused responses to the particular. Guffawing and chortling can often be unpleasant for their object, but usually by thoughtlessly inflicting the pain of social exclusion rather than by calibrated cruelty;

neither form of laughter implies the intelligence and ingenuity we associate with malice.

The crows Pelizzon has brought into being are therefore social, unkind, petty, elderly and mediocre creatures. As they form and gloat over her ageing face, we see that they rejoice in the loss of shine, promise and specialness we associate with youth. They symbolize the diminishment of self, the reduction of choice, the abridgement of hope; they are emblems of all that has lost its freshness; all that has become fusty, well-rubbed and stale.

VI

Pelizzon's uses the strange, pungent – but technically correct – word 'murder' to describe a flock of crows, and this suggests she wants to access an altogether darker and more violent stratum of crow mythology.

This use of 'murder' goes back to the fifteenth-century, although its origin is now lost. The most likely etymology is that crows feed on carrion, and a flock of crows could thus well indicate the site of a body. Certainly, in poetry, crows and murders are closely conjoined. One of Shakespeare's most celebrated murderers, Macbeth, having set the murders of Banquo and Fleance in train, reflects: '[…] Light thickens; and the crow / Makes wing to th'rooky wood; / Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse, / Whiles Night's black agents to their preys do rouse.' (*Macbeth* [1606]:III, ii, 50-2).[xxvi] And the link between crows and murder becomes even clearer if we consider the mythology associated with the largest member of the crow family. Earlier in the play, when Macbeth is announced as returning to his castle ahead of Duncan, Lady Macbeth, murmurs: '[…] The raven himself is hoarse, / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements.' (I, v, 38-40) The raven, even more than the crow, is the bird of ill-omen, whose appearance augurs pestilence, famine, mortality and the end of hope.[xxvii]

In modern poetic legend there is an altogether more terrible conjunction of crows and murder. In 1963, Ted Hughes's first wife, Sylvia Plath, gassed herself; and six years later his second wife, Assia Wevil, committed suicide in the same way, although she

magnified the horror of the earlier event by also killing their four-year-old daughter Shura. Hughes managed to express at least some of the trauma and terror of these events by finishing his collection *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* in 1970,[xxviii] a book dedicated to his dead daughter and second wife, which transmutes the eponymous bird into the archetype of all that's primitive, mocking, anarchic and surreal.

There are striking affinities between the world of *Crow* and the world of *Macbeth*. Both are dark, violent, bloody, sinister and amoral; there are similarities of imagery (for example, in both works, a connection between crows and eyes is emphasized); and there are a number of straightforward verbal echoes (e.g., 'Think of the joy will come of it / Tomorrer and Tomorrer' (*C,* p.69)). Most importantly, in both *Macbeth* and *Crow* there is a close connection between the appearance of crows and the intention to kill parents and children: in the case of *Macbeth*, a father and son; in the case of *Crow*, a mother and daughter. In this stratum of literature at least, the crow is an emblem of all that's hostile to procreation.[xxix]

VII

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 3, the mirror is used to prompt two arguments in favour of having children:

> Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
> Now is the time that face should form another,
> Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest
> Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother. (S:3:1-4)

Later in the poem, one detached copy of a face suggests another kind of detached copy, and a child comes to be seen as an image of its parent:

> Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
> Calls back the lovely April of her prime:
> ……..
> Die single, and thine image dies with thee. (S:3:9-14)

The immediately preceding poem contains another argument in favour of children. Having asked the fair youth to consider how he will look at forty, the narrator continues:

> Then being asked, where all thy beauty lies,
> Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
> To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,
> Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
> How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use
> If thou couldst answer, 'This fair child of mine
> Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse',
> Proving his beauty by succession thine:
> There were to be new made when thou art old,
> And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold. (S:2:5-14)

Thus having children, along with creating art, is seen as one way of holding age at bay and denying its triumph.

There are reasons for thinking that Pelizzon too is exercised by the issue of having children. 'Blood Memory' – the poem she published immediately before 'Nulla Dies' in *Poetry*[xxx] - opens with the narrator[xxxi] in the bath during her period:

> In a palm of pinkish water, I scoop up
> a burl of my flesh, almond-sized.
> The tissues settle, livid
> red to nearly black as I tilt my hand
> against the light to see it
> glistening like a ruby cabochon,
> appealing as it appalls,
> recalling one future, years ago,
> that would have borne itself on my blood
> had I allowed.
> The question swims into view:
> would I harbor another life now? ("BM", p.263)

Several pages later, she receives a negative answer, apparently to this very question:

> Cold in my ear's palm,
> the hematite heaviness of a final *no*. ("BM", p.267)

At the end of 'Nulla Dies', she rests her chin on her palm and thinks about fortune. The word 'palm' plays no particular or significant role in most of Pelizzon's earlier work, but it is noteworthy that 'palm' occurs twice in 'Blood Memory,' on both occasions in the course of thinking about children: it is 'a palm of pinkish water' that prompts the question of children; and it is the 'ear's palm' – an unusual expression - which hears the negative answer. It thus seems reasonable to think that the aspect of fortune which most preoccupies her in 'Nulla Dies', as she resignedly rests her chin on her palm, is the question of whether she will have children.

It is also striking that, on this issue, she feels particularly vulnerable to insults and humiliations from the mouths of mediocre, drunken men. In 'Blood Memory,' she describes a man who 'meant to make [me] bleed':

> From an alley's mouth
> a gobbet of men disgorged.
> One, drunker than the others, loomed
> over and bent his face to mine.
> *Where are your babies?* He hissed,
> spit pricking my skin.
> *Get home to your babies*. ("BM", p.266)

This scene – where a mediocre male, detached from a group, inflicts public humiliation on the age-conscious poet – is, of course, reenacted at the beginning of 'Nulla Dies'.

For these reasons, it seems plausible to think that the image in the mirror causes thoughts of children to arise for Pelizzon, but for reasons more straightforward than those found in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. In the *Sonnets*, the child is seen as a kind of image, and creating such an image is one way of triumphing over time; in 'Nulla

Dies', the image shows a middle-aged face, suggesting that the time for having children is growing shorter.

The problem of children is confronted and dissected explicitly in 'Blood Memory'; in 'Nulla Dies,' perhaps because the passage of time has made the problem more pressing, perhaps because the thought of having children is no longer at the forefront of her mind, the problem is suppressed, and only emerges obliquely and in sublimated form – both of which are hugely beneficial to the poem.

VIII

Where does the notion of an apparently detachable expression which turns into an apparently detachable face, one of the most striking ideas in Pelizzon's poem, come from? Lewis Carroll stands behind the word 'chortle' and thus the Cheshire Cat's grin offers itself as one possibility.[xxxii] But in Hughes's *Crow* we not only find the idea of detachable faces and expressions (particularly smiles and grins), but of detachable *crow* faces and detachable *crow* expressions. The influence on Pelizzon is hardly surprising: no modern poet can write about crows without being conscious of Hughes's work; and *Crow*, as we've seen, is suffused with the Shakespearean atmosphere which permeates 'Nulla Dies'.

In 'Crow's Vanity', we find Crow grinning into his mirror ('Looking close in the evil mirror […] he peered / For a glimpse of the usual grinning face'(*C,* p.36)) and, as in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, it may be this detached image of a face that gives rise to thoughts of detached expressions generally. In 'The Smile', for example, we encounter a detached version of a smile ('And at that very moment the smile arrived / And the crowd […] / Met this smile' (*C,* p.56)); and an entire Crow-song is devoted to a grin which has come adrift and seeks a suitable face:

> There was this hidden grin.
> It wanted a permanent home. It tried faces
> In their forgetful moments, the face for instance
> Of a woman pushing a baby out between her legs
> But that didn't last long […]

So the grin tried the face
Of somebody lost in sobbing
A murderer's face and the racking moments
Of the man smashing everything
He could reach and had the strength to smash. (*C,* p.19)

This passage, in which Crow's grin first settles first on a dying mother and then on a murderer, further demonstrates Crow's antipathy to life and procreation, and is one of the points where the kinds of deaths which partially motivated the writing of *Crow* enter into the subject matter of the text itself. This is the moment when Hughes's outlook and imagery are closest to Pelizzon's.

Weirdly, Hughes also contemplates the possibility of detachable faces. In 'Snake Hymn', for instance, 'The love that cannot die / Sheds the million faces' (*C,* p.81); in 'Two Eskimo Songs' 'Man came running faceless over earth' (*C,* p.86); in 'Lovesong', the lovers wake to discover that 'In the morning they wore each other's face' (*C,* p.83); and in 'Crow's Battle Fury' we find a victim 'With his glared off face glued back into position' (*C,* p.61).

What is the meaning of Hughes's Crow and why does Pelizzon, particularly in her own use of apparently detached expressions and faces, allow her work to resonate with his? For Hughes, Crow is always other, always alien, always the shadow side of life; at bottom, he represents nihilism, nothingness, non-being. This is established clearly on the first page of the book when, as in 'Nulla Dies', the hatching of a crow is considered:

To hatch a crow, a black rainbow
Bent in emptiness
over emptiness[.] (*C,* p.1)

And the point is driven home in 'Conjuring in Heaven':

So finally there was nothing.
It was put inside nothing.

Nothing was added to it
And to prove it didn't exist
Squashed flat as nothing with nothing. (*C,* p.46)

In the last section I suggested that the appearance of a crow often indicates an environment which is hostile to procreation; in this one I've also noted that the crow can also symbolize nothingness and negation. The birth of a crow could thus symbolize giving birth to nothing, a non-birth, an anti-birth; and this may well be the anxiety the image explores.

IX

But why should crows be born from her eyes? One promising line of thought is that in Renaissance literature the eye can be thought of as an egg or womb, and that this way of conceiving the eye is closely linked to the idea of reflections and detached faces already discussed. For example, in Donne's 'The Extasie,' when the two lovers look into one another's eyes, they see small images of their own faces, and describe the result as a kind of getting or propagation:

So to' intergraft our hands, as yet
    Was all our means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
    Was all our propogation.[xxxiii]

The age found important sympathies between eyes and eggs: they have a similar shape, they are intensely vulnerable, they are both filled with viscous transparent fluid, and they both have rounded, darkened centres. Some of these affinities are explored in *King Lear* [1607]. The eye-imagery in this play, which is horridly literalized in the blinding of Gloucester, is well known: but the sight-pattern exists alongside a subordinate and otherwise rather baffling set of remarks about eggs. For example:

Fool: Nuncle, give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns.
Lear: What two crowns shall they be?

Fool: Why, after I have cut the egg i'the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. (I, iv, 149-152)

And after the blinding of Gloucester, the third servant wants to apply eggs to his eye-sockets: 'Go thou: I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face. Now heaven help him!' (III, vii, 105-6) In line with standard Renaissance doctrine, a remedy is sought in an object which bears a physical affinity to the damaged part of the body.[xxxiv]

Although eggs form a very minor theme, they allow Shakespeare to link the sight pattern to several other major image-clusters in the play. An egg looks like a zero and this resemblance is still recorded in common speech:[xxxv] a nil score in tennis is referred to as 'love' (an Anglicization of the French 'l'oeuf');[xxxvi] a nil score in cricket is referred to as 'a duck' (short for 'a duck's egg'). Eggs therefore not only allow Shakespeare to link the sight-pattern with notions of crowns and kingship (as in the dialogue with the Fool quoted above), but with the central themes of love and nothingness.

Thus, if these patterns of association are followed through, they may indicate that the birth of a crow from the eye signifies nothingness and non-birth. The eye, through its affinities with zero, symbolizes nothingness; the crow signifies non-being and non-birth. Nothing has come of nothing.

X

If the emergence of crows through the narrator's eyes is a form of birth, is the appearance of a new old face which nearly hops off her old new face a second kind of birth? The transmission of a face is certainly one way of describing birth (especially down a number of generations); it can be found, for example, in Richard Savage's famous lines in praise of the bastard: 'He lives to build, not boast, a generous race, / No tenth transmitter of a foolish face!'[xxxvii] And there is also an intriguing analogy between Pelizzon's new old face – composed entirely of wrinkles – and the wrinkles of a new-born child.

But giving birth to an elderly face would be a way of *jettisoning* that face, and would thus be a way of solving rather than emphasizing the problem of age. Instead, it makes better sense to emphasize the 'nearly' in 'nearly hops / off'. Both Hughes's Crow-face and Pelizzon's crow-face appear alien enough to have a life of their own, and alien enough to be the face of an unwelcome other. But whereas Hughes's Crow-face both appears to be and is detachable, Pelizzon's crow-face appears to be detachable but is in fact irremovable. The tragedy of Hughes's Crow-face is that it passes, for example, from the dying mother to the murderer; the tragedy of Pelizzon's crow-face is that it has taken up permanent residence and is not going anywhere.

XI

The crow narrative could also symbolize anxiety about Shakespeare's other stay against physical wasting: poetry. 'No day without a line' suggests a certain kind of insecurity: if the artist does not practice every day, his technique will begin to coarsen, his talent begin to fade. Indeed, the lives of professional artists are beset by anxiety, not only about their technique, but their originality and fecundity. Is my work just a product of taste and intelligence? Have I simply borrowed certain tropes and gestures from more famous names and combined them in new and artful ways? Do I have a voice of my own? Do I have something to say? Have I done my best work? If I have written or painted well once, can I do it again? Is my work failing to develop? Have I just convinced myself – and possibly a few others – of my talent? And so on. When an artist is striving for eternal recognition, as both Apelles and Shakespeare say they are, then the pressure and anxiety are further heightened. The 'Rival Poet' sequence in the *Sonnets* (S:76-83) indicates that even Shakespeare appeared to suffer from artistic insecurity despite the confidence he expresses elsewhere.

If the artist does not raise these questions for himself, then other people are bound to raise them for him. The image of the crow has often played a central role in such criticisms. In Horace's *Epistles 1.3* about poetic style, for instance, a false poet called Celsus is warned by Horace 'not to pilfer from other writers any longer, lest those he has robbed should return one day to claim their feathers, when like the crow […] stripped of its stolen splendour […] he would become a laughing stock.'[xxxviii] The image is taken up by Henry Chettle (posing as the recently dead Robert Greene[xxxix]) in

a famous attack on Shakespeare in 1592, which is the first known published reference to Shakespeare's writing:

> Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes fac totum [jack of all trades], is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in the country (Quoted in *UC,* p.39).

The image is telling and archetypal: when seen for what he is, this poet is a mere actor, a mere crow, dressed and beautified in the borrowed feathers of real poets; only his conceit disguises this fact from himself. For Shakespeare, the insult appears to have lodged deep. The word 'beautified' is subject to disparagement in *Hamlet* (written in about 1600): '[…] *beautified* is a vile phrase' (II, ii, 111-112); similarly, the crow that appears in Sonnet 70 (first published in 1609) and spoils 'heaven's sweetest air' does not exist in actuality, but is falsely brought into being by envy (S:70:4).

XII

The idea that there is intellectual - as well as physical - pregnancy, labour and parenthood is explored by Plato in the *Symposium* (201d-210a), *Phaedrus* (249d-257a) and *Theaetetus* (150b-c), and poets have not been slow to apply these intuitively plausible ideas to their own profession.

Poetry is connected with the idea of children in at least four ways. First, there is the notion that the period of composition is a kind of incubation or pregnancy. A good example of this is found in R.S.Thomas's 'A Person from Porlock'[xl] where he imagines Coleridge interrupted in the throes of composition ('big with the poem / Soon to be born, his nerves tense to endure / The long torture of delayed birth'[xli]) and then unable to recapture his inspiration once his visitor has left:

> The encounter over, he came, seeing his room
> Seeking the contact with his lost self;

> Groping his way endlessly back
> On the poem's path, calling by name
> The foetus stifling in the mind's gloom.[xlii]

Secondly, there is the notion that the inspirer of a poem can be thought of as its begetter or father. This conception is found in the dedication to the first edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, probably added by the printer Thomas Thorpe, which tells us that Mr W.H. is the 'onlie begetter'[xliii] of the sequence which follows. Thirdly, there is the idea, which runs throughout Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (e.g., 18, 55, 65) that, like a child, a poem can remain beautiful and alive even when its creator – and those he writes about – are declined in years or dead. Finally, there is the notion that a true poem, like a child, possess a kind of organic, indivisible and living wholeness. It is therefore not surprising that the emergence of a poem should be allegorized as a kind of birth.

Sometimes poetic pregnancy is simply a false pregnancy and nothing is produced at all; at other times, something is produced, but the product is inferior, or sham, or counterfeit. It is clearly the critic's task to determine whether the product of labour is a poem, and if so, how valuable a poem it is. This is a crucial difference between physical and intellectual pregnancy, and Socrates makes much of the disanalogy between a midwife who helps women give physical birth, and his own self-appointed task as an intellectual midwife to male philosophers:

> **Socrates:** […] You can see how important midwifery is, but it still falls short of my business. For women cannot produce offspring which are sometimes true, but sometimes illusory, with the difference hard to discern. I mean, if that were the case, the finest and most crucial task that midwives could perform would be distinguishing the true from the false. Don't you agree? […] My midwifery has all the standard features, except that I practice it on men rather than women, and supervise the labour of their minds, not their bodies. And the most important aspect of my skill is the ability to apply every conceivable test to see whether the young man's mental offspring is illusory and false or viable and true (*T*:150b-c).[xliv]

Just as it's natural to think of the expression of true ideas and true poems in terms of healthy birth, so it's natural to think of the production of false ideas and false poems in terms of unviable birth or grotesque birth. Socrates describes young men's illusory offspring as 'phantoms' or 'wind-eggs' (i.e., eggs without yokes)[xlv] (*T*:150-150b); Pelizzon allegorizes the false poet producing false poems as a human crow giving birth to crows. As a species is defined as a group of organisms which reproduces its own kind, giving birth to a crow can betray the parent crow concealed beneath its borrowed feathers. Such a revelation is painful enough if it is only made to others; it is even more painful if the discovery undermines the self-deception of the parent bird itself. This is the artistic anxiety which appears to lie concealed beneath the title's injunction.

But why should these false offspring be born through the eye? Perhaps because the language of the eye is frequently the language of the intellect and understanding ('I see what you mean'); perhaps because the eye - of all sense organs - is most closely associated with vanity, ambition, and addiction to appearance. (The connection between eyes and this last group of vices is confirmed when we look at another important text from the 1606-9 period, George Hakewell's *Vanities of the Eye* (Oxford, 1608)). Giving birth to a crow through one's eye, thus becomes an emblem of how vanity and intellectual ambition can give birth to false poems and make us mistake true poetic achievement for its simulacra; and the link with nothingness is confirmed when we notice that vanity is characteristically 'hollow' or 'empty'.

XIII

Why should it be Shakespeare's work from 1606-9 make such a deep imprint on Pelizzon's poem? It is natural that *Macbeth* and *King Lear* (first performed in 1606 and 1607) should embody themes and attitudes from the decade in which they were written. Some of *Sonnets* were written early in Shakespeare's career, but quite a few are now thought to originate from the first decade of the seventeenth century, and the whole sequence was probably thoroughly revised in the period immediately preceding its publication (See *SS*, pp.13-28). It is therefore equally natural that the *Sonnets* (published in 1609) should embody themes and attitudes from the same decade.

It was a time of profound transition – in monarch (Elizabeth I to James I), in dynasty (the Tudors to Stuarts), in national identity (James was the first monarch to rule both England and Scotland), and in intellectual outlook ('The new philosophy calls all in doubt […]' (*DP*, p.276)). It was also a time of political tension and conflict (Essex's Rebellion of 1601 and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605), and natural disaster (severe London plague-outbreaks in 1603 and 1609). Perhaps the decade thus forms a natural, dark-hued background for thinking about the different stages of life and the transitions between them.

XIV

The two anxieties I have identified in 'Nulla Dies' are those which beset the middle-aged rather than the old: women can only have children when comparatively young; poets are rarely at their best beyond their middle years (although there are occasional exceptions). These observations suggest why Pelizzon is so concerned about lines on her face - some of the first obvious signs of ageing - rather than the graver consequences of physical decay which come later in life. Like Shakespeare, she is certainly sees loss of beauty as a misfortune in its own right; unlike Shakespeare, she takes these symptoms of passing years to imply that two important windows of opportunity are slowly closing. Thus the crows finally prove to have a triple rather than dual function: they represent a physical problem; they represent the mocking response to that problem; and they represent, in veiled symbolic form, two anxieties which make the problem worse.

XV

In the last line and a half, as I've already noted, the pattern of imagery appears to change. Crows and flying are apparently left behind, and we encounter two words linked by the concept of money ('half-cashed' and 'fortune'), and one word, 'palm' which seems unrelated to either crows and flying, or money.

In fact, a closer look at 'palm' suggests it is intimately connected with both image-clusters. It is related to the theme of crows and flying because 'palm' - as well as describing the flat, grasping surface of the hand – can be used to refer to the underside

of a bird's claw: 'a broad grasping surface on a bird's foot.'[xlvi] In addition, 'palm' is related to money because of its use in the idioms 'greasing a palm' or 'crossing a palm' i.e. handing over money surreptitiously – possibly as a sweetener or bribe. Thus 'palm' itself surreptitiously introduces the money theme which becomes explicit in the middle of the last line with 'half-cashed', and appears slightly more ambiguously at the end with 'fortune.' It is glumly appropriate that the poem's final and sobering reflections should be described with two words, 'palm' and 'fortune', both of which can indicate triumph and wealth.

The crow and flying images of the poem's main body are also linked to the money imagery by the notion of a line; indeed lines form the underlying unifying pattern of the poem as a whole. It seems likely that Apelles specifically mentioned lines in the title's injunction because of the importance he ascribed to outlines, but Pliny recounts one story which suggests that lines played another - unusually central - role in Apelles' life and art.

Pliny records that Apelles went to visit to the painter Protogenes in his house on Rhodes. Protogenes was out when he arrived, and a serving woman asked Apelles' for his name so his visit could later be reported to her master. Seeing a large panel prepared for painting in the corner, Apelles took a brush and drew an extremely fine straight line across it, asking the woman to tell Protogenes that 'This came from me.' When Protogenes returned and saw the line, he realized that only Apelles could have painted anything so exquisite. Feeling challenged, however, he took up a brush and painted an even finer line in another colour on top of the first. When, in due course, Apelles returned and saw Protogenes' work, he took up a brush and painted the finest possible line on top of the second. On seeing this, Protogenes admitted defeat, and went out to find Apelles himself. In other words, Apelles was not only concerned with outlines; he demonstrated his mastery by means of painting straight lines.[xlvii]

The English word 'line' does not quite occur in the poem's title, although it is embedded in 'linea', and it is implied but not stated in the lines: 'throwing the punch of his / one joke.' A joke does not usually have a punch, but it does normally have a punch *line*, and the word 'line' hangs in the air for the reader to notice.

This kind of implication is characteristic of the poem: the central image of the mirror and its reflections is not mentioned but merely implied, and the word 'caw' still pokes out from the end of 'guffaw'. In addition, as I've already pointed out, crow's claws are a step away from 'crow's feet'; and 'dirty man' clearly suggests the cliché 'dirty old man' – the implied 'old' reinforcing the poem's central worry, and preparing the way for two uses of that word later in the poem. More remote suggestions are also in play: the implied amalgam of 'crow' and 'flown' ('crone'), 'crow' and 'fly' ('cry'), gesture towards an extrapolation point beyond the poem's field of vision and control.

We encounter lines again when the poet refers to her 'lashes' wings' and these striations soon modulate into the 'clawed feet' at the sides of her eyes, possibly by way of her lashes' shadows. By the time we reach 'When I squint, when I / grin […],' a set of lines round her eyes have ramified to cover her entire face. Talk of perching and staring crows may also suggest the parallel lines of telegraph wires, since this is the place where groups of birds are most easily seen and studied. This picture will also put us in mind, of course, of the three lines on drawn on top of one another on Protogenes' panel (which will produce the visual appearance of five parallel lines); indeed, if we really wish to push the point, the thin, horizontal parallel lines on this panel may suggest the thin, horizontal parallel lines of Pelizzon's stanzas.[xlviii]

Connecting parallel lines with the ageing process has clear poetic precedents. On the one hand, the two parallel lines formed by footprints or rails can symbolize the progress of life. Longfellow speaks of 'footprints on the sands of time';[xlix] and the ageing Larkin, reflecting on why he has no wife and child, and why his life has taken a different course from those of his contemporaries, finds his thoughts symbolized when, walking to the end of a station platform, he notices: 'the ranged / Joining and parting lines reflect a strong // Unhindered moon' (*L,* p.66). On the other hand, parallel lines can symbolize the lines which gradually form on the forehead. In Shakespeare's sonnet 60, for example, we find: 'Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth, / And delves the parallels on beauty's brow' (S:60:9-10).

Finally, the money-images at the end of the poem are linked to the line imagery – and therefore the earlier crow-imagery - by means of the lines on Pelizzon's palm which intimate her fortune.

It is striking that although crows populate the first section of the poem, they are never shown as flying: they guffaw, answer, chortle, stretch their claws, perch, stare, and nearly hop, but they are never explicitly linked with their most characteristic activity. They are not even shown as moving their wings: it is the *possibility* of the crows being able to flap that prompts the line, 'There the unflappable years / perch and stare', but this possibility is never shown as being actual; indeed, the possibility is only invoked through its specific denial. Of course, the poet considers 'what's flown, / and what might yet fly,' but the most obvious subject of this verb is years or possibly opportunities. As 'time flying' and 'years which have flown' are such commonplace idioms, there is no need to make sense of her ponderings by thinking of crows. I suspect Pelizzon's crows do not fly for the same reason they do not hop: they have taken up residence in her face and will not be moving.[l]

One reason why Pelizzon keeps the closely related notions of crows and flying separate at the level of statement is because she wants the reader to recognize that they are related at the level of implication. In fact, beyond the obvious point that we know crows fly, two specific kinds of implication are involved here: one verbal and one pictorial. The verbal implication is that the controlling master-image behind the whole written page is the unmentioned phrase: 'As the crow flies.' Presumably, time flies as the crow flies – measuredly, consistently, undeflectably – and in *a straight line*. 'As the crow flies' thus links crows and flying; it links crows to Apelles' lines; it links lines to time; and lines – via 'palm' - allow the modulation to fortune and money-imagery at the end of the poem. The pictorial implication she wants us to notice is the Shakespearean way of connecting multiple parallel lines with ageing. Characteristically, each furrow on the brow will take the form of two shallow arches which meet at their lowest point above the nose. This pattern is also the schematic shape used by children to depict large, distant flying birds, and it may well be a pattern of such dark parallel lines which gives Pelizzon the idea that the pale hill of her brow is inhabited by crows.[li]

If I am right in thinking that anxieties about false poems and not having children are enacted in the poem's crow-narrative, then this obviously connects with lines in two ways. First, her artistic anxieties are about lines in the poetic sense (and she has here written lines *about* lines, just as Apelles earlier collaborated in painting a work which

consists solely *of* lines);[lii] and second, her worries about children relate to her lack of immediate line or lineage (a word even more closely related to the Latin 'linea' than 'line' itself).

Shakespeare, of course, has already linked the lines of poetry to family lines. Recommending the fair youth conceive a child, he writes:

> So should the lines of life that life repair,
> Which this, time's pencil or my pupil pen,
> Neither in inward worth nor outward fair,
> Can make you live yourself in eyes of men. (S:16:9-12)

XVI

Besides its adroit use of literary traditions, archetypes, image-clusters, and implications, the poem demonstrates numerous felicities of rhythm, tone and diction.

One feature to note is the subtle, and quite possibly unconscious, management of vowel sounds. Long and short 'a'-sounds – as in 'guffaw', 'answer', 'unflappable', 'face' 'palm' and 'cashed' – are constant throughout. The 'e'-sound, on the other hand, is not well represented at the beginning (only 'dirty',[liii] 'nearer' and 'murder') or at the end (only 'yet', 'lean', 'where'), but has considerable importance in the central sections ('feet', 'there', 'years', 'perch', 'when', 'when' 'new', 'nearly', 'new' etc). With 'o' sounds the pattern is reversed: there are many of them in the two opening and two final stanzas, but they are not present in stanza three at all.

'I' and 'y'-sounds become denser as the poem proceeds. There are a mere two in the opening stanza ('his' and 'dirty'), a large group in stanzas three and four, and then six in the last stanza ('might', 'yet', 'fly', 'I', 'chin', 'lies'). The short 'u'-sound works in the opposite direction. This rarer vowel dominates the opening stanza ('guffaw', 'punch', 'murder' – two out of the three having stressed syllables); has a last gasp in the lighter 'unflappable'; and then disappears from the poem altogether (except for the 'u' in 'fortune' which is pronounced 'yoo'). While the short u-sound vanishes with the nightmare crows, the 'i'-sound – one form of which is found in the first

person - begins to dominate as thought and action (considering, squinting, grinning) replace appalled staring.

Thus each of the four basic vowel sounds has its own unduplicated frequency pattern. This gives the poem a sense of ease and variety, and ensures that each stage of the poem's developing thought is embodied in a developing soundscape.

XVII

Pelizzon's use of rhythm is equally deft. The dactylic skip of: '[…] throwing the punch of his' (- u u – u u) makes the line-opening spondees of 'one joke' (- -) all the flatter. And a couple of minor deletions allow us to hear that the crow's initial guffaw finds its grammatical echo in the murder's answer:

> A crow guffaws, […] throwing the punch of his / one joke.
>
> […] a murder answers, chortling from the pale hill's brow.

Frequently, the poem requires us to revise or question earlier assumptions or imaginings. The use of 'murder' is so unusual that one initially thinks it refers to an intentional killing or is a misprint for 'murderer'; only reading further convinces us that 'flock of crows' is indeed the correct interpretation. Similarly, when we read the phrase 'pale hill's brow' we initially think that a pale hill is being described and that 'brow' is a metaphor. It is only when we come to the next lines that we realize that it is the brow which has been described and that 'pale hill' is the metaphor. Our imaginations then have to reconfigure the mental image we had already formed from 'the pale hill's brow' (which is what appears on the page), to 'brow's pale hill' (which is what's meant). The effect is disconcerting: crows on a pale hill could be quite distant; crows on or in the brow are horribly close.[liv] We have to engage in yet further retrospective revision with 'from under my lashes' wings.' This initially suggests luxuriance, but acquires an element of the grotesque several words later when we realize that it is emerging *crows'* wings that are being metaphorically described.

I've already noted that a real flock of crows is unstable; the surreal metamorphoses of Pelizzon's crows - emerging from the eye, chortling from the brow, changing from many to one - greatly expand the range of this unpredictability; and finally, the frequent revisions the reader is forced to make add yet a third level of mutability. It is these interpenetrating layers of instability which give the poem some of its complexity and shimmer; some of its aura of unpindownable, organic elusiveness.

There is ease and amplitude in the basic iambic of 'From under my lashes' wings they stretch' - tinged with a hint of amphibraic - which again stops short at the off-putting spondees of 'clawed feet'. And the stresses at the beginning and end of 'There the unflappable years / perch and stare', keep 'there', 'years', 'perch', and 'stare' firmly rooted to the earth. The next lines are remarkable:

> […] When I squint, when
>
> I grin, my new old face nearly hops
> off my old new face.

This passage contains 17 words, 16 of which are monosyllables, and the potential tongue-twister of 'old new face' and 'new old face' presents a further hazard to fluent reading. Moreover, 'From under my lashes' wings they stretch / clawed feet. There the unflappable years / perch and stare,' contains one i-sound ('wings') but all the other vowels are longish u's, a's and e's. When we reach, '[…] when I squint, when I / grin,' not only does the clause-length rapidly shorten, but we are faced with a sudden cluster of i-sounds at the front of the mouth which further impede our progress. The result is that, when we arrive at 'hops,' we have already been progressing by small staccato steps – imitative of a bird's hopping – for some time. This way of moving is particularly relevant to the present case because a crow's progress on the ground is distinctively halting[lv], the more so in Pelizzon's case because the gait is new and unfamiliar to her - she has yet to find her (crow's) feet. The stanza-break between 'hops' and 'off', of course, continues this enactment of a bird's movements.

The poem's thought and situation may be reminiscent of Larkin, but there seems to be little similarity of approach, technique or verse form. In fact, there are two striking affinities which show Larkin's work to be assimilated rather than imitated.[lvi]

First, as I argued in Section II, Pelizzon's poem progresses from the concrete to the abstract, and we often find the same movement in Larkin. In his longer poems ('Church-Going' or 'An Arundel Tomb' for example (*L,* pp.35-7 and 71-2)), he frequently allows abstract philosophical conclusions to emerge from concrete descriptions, although these descriptions - unlike those at the opening of 'Nulla Dies' - tend to be of perceived places. This is not always the case, however: the opening lines of 'If, My Darling' (*L,* p.43-4) are evidently fantastic (and draw deep on Lewis Carroll).

Second, the openings of many of Larkin's more extended poems ('Livings I' for example (*L,* p.77)) are only approximately iambic in movement: they tend to be broken up by additional syllables and other irregularities. Gradually, however, a weightier and more classical rhythm emerges as the poem reaches its sonorous and philosophical conclusion, and it is this regularity of rhythm which helps make many of his final lines so memorable. Pelizzon uses the same technique in 'Nulla Dies'. The first stanza contains 22 syllables – 13 in the first line, 9 in the second – and has little rhythmic regularity:

> A crow guffaws, dirty man throwing the punch of his
> one joke. And now, nearer, a murder / […]
>
> u _ u _ , _ u _ _ u u _ u u
> _ _ . u _ , _ u , u _ u / […]

By contrast, the last stanza has only 18 syllables – 8 in the first line, 10 in the second and - apart from two extra unstressed beats – moves in a sonorous iambic metre:

> What might yet fly, I lean my chin
> On the palm where my half-cashed fortune lies.

u _ u _ , u _ u _
u u _ u u _ u _ u _ .

The poem seems to discover its fundamental rhythm at the same moment it feels able to articulate a provisional and abstract conclusion, and the rightness of one reinforces the rightness of the other.

XVIII

I hope I have now illustrated the virtues mentioned in my introduction, and shown that the poem's resonances with English literature from 1606-9 – particularly Shakespeare's tragedies and *Sonnets* – are rich and complex. Although one cannot yet say of Pelizzon's poem, 'So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,' its emotional charge and organic complexity give grounds for thinking it could become a minor classic.[lvii]

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[i] V. Penelope Pelizzon, *Nostos* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000).

[ii] V. Penelope Pelizzon, *Whose Flesh is Flame, Whose Bone is Time* (Chipping Norton; The Waywiser Press, 2014), p.26.

[iii] 'Nulla Dies Sine Linea' first appeared in *Poetry*, April 2012, Vol.200, No.1:19. I have left the beginnings of lines uncapitalized as in this original publication.

[iv] Pelizzon is an associate professor of English at the University of Connecticut (Storrs campus).

[v] Most of this information is derived from Pliny the Elder, trans. H.Rackham, *The Natural History*, Books 33-35, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp.319-333.

[vi] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (London: Williams and Northgate, [1883] 1946), p.317.

[vii] The expression is from a pa*s*sage in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which, in more modern translation, runs: 'A poem is like a picture: one suits your fancy more, the nearer you stand; another, the father away. This courts the shade, that will wish to be in the light, and dreads not the critic[al] insight of the judge. This pleased but once, that, though ten times called for, will always please.' Horace, trans. H.R.Fairclough, *Ars Poetica* (Cambridge, MA: 1961), ll.361-365, p.481.

[viii] Pelizzon has decided not to publish the complete work, but some sections can be found in print. For example: 'The Ladder,' *The Missouri Review*, 29.4 (Winter 2006): 93-103; and 'Five poems from *The Monongahela Book of Hours,*' in the *New England Review* 24.4 (2004):138-40.

[ix] I use 'action' in the philosophical sense to mean an agent's behaviour brought about by his/her beliefs and desires. See Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' in his *Essays on Action and Events*, Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp.3-20.

[x] With reference to sections XI-XIV, it's worth pointing out that Wordsworth identifies 'looking before and after' as a distinctive activity of the poet. 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads […] (1802)', in Stephen Gill (ed.), *William Wordsworth*, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.606.

[xi] All Shakespeare references are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, (eds) Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan and Harold Jenkins (London: Thomson, 2001).

[xii] All Larkin references (hereafter *L*) are to Archie Burnett (ed.), *Philip Larkin: The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

[xiii] Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p.192.

[xiv] I sent an early version of this paper to Pelizzon who kindly responded. She agreed that the allusion to the sonnet form was unconscious although 'the sonnets are always in one's ear' and that 'while working on this poem I was also working on a long poem – still in process – that has much more direct borrowing from the *Sonnets*, especially 'Thou art thy mother's glass…'.' Notes to author 12th May 2013.

[xv] Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.51.

[xvi] Edmondson and Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p.52.

[xvii] References to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (hereafter S) are by number and line number(s).

[xviii] A crow plays a similar but more general function in Sonnet 113:12.

[xix] Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto I, ccxiii-ccxx, extracted, under the title 'Growing Old', in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1950* (ed.) Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp.574-5.

[xx] Matthew Arnold, 'Growing Old', *Matthew Arnold: The Complete Poems*, (eds) Kenneth and Miriam Allott, Second Revised Edition (London: Longman, 1979), pp.582-4.

[xxi] Thomas Hardy, *Selected Poems* (ed.) David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.289.

[xxii] I assume that Shakespeare was born on or about his official birthday, the 23rd April 1564, and that the *Sonnets* were completed at least a month or so before Thomas Thorpe, their first printer, entered them in the Stationers' Register on 20th May 1609. See Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, The Arden Edition (London: Thomson, 2004), p.7. Hereafter *SS*.

[xxiii] I use this abstract noun in the philosophical sense of 'being able to have a relationship with the non-existent' (for example, believing in unicorns). Some philosophers consider this to be the criterion which distinguishes the mental from the physical. See Franz Brentano, trans. Linda L.McAlister, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge, [1874] 1995), pp.88-102.

[xxiv] Adrian Room (ed), *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 15th edition (London: Cassell, 1996), p.270.

[xxv] Lewis Carroll, 'Jabberwocky', *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, pp.730-31.

[xxvi] For approximate datings of Shakespeare plays, I follow Peter Alexander (ed) *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (London: Collins, [1951] 1978), p.xv.

[xxvii] Pelizzon comments: '*Macbeth* is one of the plays that was most formative in my teenage years, so I have no doubt the rooky woods are deeply lodged in my subconscious.' Notes to author, 12th May 2013.

[xxviii] Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London: Faber and Faber, [1972] 1995), hereafter *C*.

[xxix] The murder of Duncan, apparently announced by the raven, is also brought into significant proximity with the killing of parents and children on two occasions. First, when Lady Macbeth says she would have murdered Duncan herself 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept' (II, ii, 12-13)); and second, when she emphasizes the implacable force of her cruelty by saying: '[…] I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd the nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this' (I, vii, 54-9).

[xxx] *Poetry*, Vol.195, No.4, January 2010: 263-9. Hereafter "BM" followed by page number.

[xxxi] In the present context, I use 'Pelizzon' and 'the narrator' interchangeably, and also use some of Pelizzon's poems to throw light on others. For a theoretical defence of both practices, see my 'The Problem of Perfect Fakes' in Anthony O'Hear (ed), *Philosophy and the Arts*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.151-176.

[xxxii] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (London: Dent, [1865] 1971), p.71.

[xxxiii] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* (ed.) A.J.Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.54. Hereafter *DP*. Donne's poems are hard to date, but it's possible that this poem falls into the 1606-9 period: 'The Expiration' – a poem with many connections to 'The Extasie' – first appeared in Ferrabosco's *Airs* in 1609. See (*DP*, p.19).

[xxxiv] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), pp.25-30.

[xxxv] The late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century was the period when Arabic numerals were replacing Roman numerals in Western Europe, and the Roman system has no sign for the empty set. Consequently, the zero's shape and meaning would have been more novel and striking to Shakespeare and his contemporaries than they are to us.

[xxxvi] See A.D.Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), p.302.

[xxxvii] 'The Bastard', in *The Poetical Works of Richard Savage, With the Life of the Author* (ed.) Samuel Johnson (Edinburgh: At the Apollo Press, 1780), p.89.

[xxxviii] Quoted in Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare: Upstart Crow to Sweet Swan 1592-1623*, The Arden Shakespeare Library (London: Thomson, 2011), pp.39-40. Hereafter *UC*.

[xxxix] I here follow Duncan-Jones (*UC*, pp.37-45).

[xl] R.S.Thomas, *Song at the Year's Turning: Poems 1942-1954* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), quoted in Christopher Morgan, *R.S.Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.29-32.

[xli] Morgan, *R.S.Thomas*, p.30.

[xlii] Morgan, *R.S.Thomas*, p.31.

[xliii] Thorpe's dedication is quoted in Duncan-Jones (*SS*, p.109).

[xliv] Plato, *Theaetetus* (ed. and trans.) Robin Waterfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). Hereafter *T*.

[xlv] 'Phantom' is the translation adopted by F.M.Cornford (*The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (eds) Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp.845-919; 'wind-egg' is adopted by Benjamin Jowett, Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Teddington: Arc Manor, [1871] 2008).

[xlvi] *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol.II, (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p.2028, col.1.

[xlvii] Pliny, *Natural History*, pp.321-323. It's quite possible that Apelles drew fine straight lines as a regular technical exercise to keep his hand in (rather like a pianist practising his scales), and that his maxim, 'Nulla dies sine linea' refers to this habit. If his practice was well known, it may be one reason why Protogenes recognized Apelles' work so quickly.

[xlviii] Apelles' and Protogenes' lines will produce the following pattern: two repeated colours; an unrepeated colour; two repeated colours. Pelizzon's first two stanzas will produce the same pattern: two repeated colours (two black lines); an unrepeated colour (white); two repeated colours (two blacks lines).

[xlix] 'Lives of great men will remind us / We can make our lives sublime, / And, departing, leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time [.]' 'A Psalm of Life: What the Heart of a Young Man said to the Psalmist', in *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Edinburgh: Gall and Inglis, 1855), pp.49-50.

[li] Pelizzon's attention passes from the crows living on her brow to crows emerging from her eyes. Precedents for these literary crows' habitations have already been set by literary ravens. The cliché 'raven brow' includes both the forehead (as in 'the raven brow of night') and the eyebrow (which echoes and exaggerates the shape of forehead furrows); the cliché of the raven-black eye is found in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: '[…] my mistress' eyes are raven black'. (S:126:9) The expression 'raven

brow of night' can be found, for example, in Maurice's 'Ode to Mithra', Part II (Thomas Maurice, *Grove Hill and Ode to Mithra* (London: Arch and Wright, 1799), p.64.

[lii] Apelles' and Protogenes' lines were actually exhibited for many years, before being destroyed in a fire in Caesar's palace in the Palatine; here, they 'were more esteemed than any masterpiece.' Pliny, *Natural History*, p.323. This was clearly the world's first example of Minimal Art.

[liii] The 'y' in 'dirty' is sounded 'ee'.

[liv] This is another good example of a technique Pelizzon uses throughout the poem: subverting, complicating and refreshing a common idiom ('the brow of a hill').

[lv] The carrion crow 'walks and sidles with ungainly hops.' Kathleen N.Daly, *Interesting British Birds* (London: Blackie and Son, 1956), p.28.

[lvi] Pelizzon has published two essays on Larkin: '"Oh Play That Thing!": Larkin's 'For Sidney Bechet'', in *About Larkin: The Journal of the Philip Larkin Society*, 5, 1998: 17-18; and 'Native Carnival: Philip Larkin's Puppet Theatre of Ritual', in James Booth (ed.), *New Larkins for Old* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.213-223.

[lvii] I would like to thank John Gibson, Garry Hagberg, Alan Heaven, Marie McGinn, Penelope Pelizzon, and the organizers and audience at the Shakespeare Sonnets Workshop, University of York, 28th February 2014, for help and encouragement.