"Sunt et mea contra Fata mihi."

THE CROWS.

Grierson Verse Prize Entry.
When autumn winds come whistling from the west,
When leaves fall in uncertain showers and lie
In crackling drifts of amber, then the crows
Fly inland to the hardening, frosted fields,
Their torn wings spread against the high winds, tossed,
Tattered and broken, flagging in the sky.
Now, gliding breast-deep in the air, they drift
Sidelong, wings still and widespread, till the wind
Strikes like a river-current, and they rise,
Cawing protest against the elements.
Now, when the frost-rimed grasses blow towards
Their flight, they fall in solitary pairs
Suddenly, gamet-wise, into the gale,
Into the sunset glow. They lower brakes,
The ragged edge of wing, the fan-spread tail,
The hooked claws reaching for the ground. They stall,
Their magic fades above the waves of grass,
They land.

Over the sky in arrowed flight
At dusk, the geese fly inland overhead.
Long skeins form and re-form against the gold
And copper clouds of evening, and they call
Ceaselessly to each other as they fly.
The earth below them is as dull as lead.
A white frost haze drives upwards from the fields,
With trees breaking its surface like the tops
Of islands in the loch the grey geese seek.
They break and wheel in restless arcs of sound,
Crying and crying till the wan note stops
In unseen heights of sky.

Hunched into wind,
Twelve thousand feet below of sharp, sheer air,
The crows stand silent underneath the clouds,
Firmly on earth, black, hooded, rooted there.
Once we were airborne and held high ideals.  
Even the winds were suborned to our pace,  
Once.  But the scudding autumn cloud conceals  
Parnassus and Mount Helicon, all trace  
Of Hippocrene. And therefore we are dry,  
Our wit congeals.  
Oh, we are hooded, hooded and obscure.  
We watch the future with a jealous eye,  
We take one slow step forward, cautiously.  
We see the autumn perish. We endure.

We are the hooded dons.  
Our minds are deep, remote and erudite,  
Reflecting darkly on the Age of Bronze,  
The Speed of Light.

Our gowns, a trifle frayed,  
Are dusty with the chalk of expositions  
Of sciences, tongues, times and tides, inlaid  
With admonitions.

But you, of course, complain.  
You are ex-Service students, and you cry  
That much of our philosophy's inane,  
Does not apply.

You say we thrive on death or a  
Dead age, we murder to dissect, are knackers,  
That in ahint yon tome, there lies a plethora  
Of new-slain makars.

You ask us to forget  
Our learning, join your philanthropic flights  
Of fancy and experience, to set  
The world to rights.

Our wisdom, with your might,  
Ambition, humour, zest and all,  
Should surely see the enemies of light  
And beauty fall.

Why not? Are we too far  
Removed from your ideals? We had the same  
Youth once, a war, then suddenly a star,  
A steadfast aim,
Peace. And what happened then?
Our world rocked, values fell. We tried to save
The only certainties we knew for men,
To cheat the grave

Of just a little learning....
Your gallant plans bear low percentage. No,
Our flame of zeal consumed its yearning
Too long ago.

We strike the cynic note.
Our minds are otherwise engaged, and youth
Is in its proper place, when we devote
Our search to truth.

The earth is ice and stone beneath our feet.
Our minds are bleak as these west winds that rasp
The tinkling grasses in a gust of sleet.
Maybe these clods are worlds within our grasp,
And greatness waits to consecrate our lives?
The clouds repeat
Our cry of momentary triumph, till
The knowledge of our carrion destiny revives.
The darkness shrouds our spirits and deprives
Us of illusion. We are still.
We are the beauties of a thousand songs, 
Alive to see our poet's boast fulfilled. 
He has avenged his dear, imagined wrongs 
And all his jealous prophecies are stilled. 
Only his verses think us lovely now, 
Complete and self-sufficient in their rhyme 
Of rounded lip and smooth, untroubled brow. 
A poet makes no enemy of time. 
But we are old, our loveliness is dead, 
The unicorns we tamed are wild and free. 
Old age and death share all our thoughts, instead 
Of gay good looks and precious gallantry. 
What sonnet would he write for us today, 
Watching our bitter autumn drift away? 

"To see your beauty fading with the days, 
While fog drips melancholy-wise from trees 
Which once shone newly green in summer haze. 
To know the mirrored truth is worse than these 
Faint, warning shadows of the year's decay 
In grey, unhappy vanity and fears. 
To see the dark, reflected danger play 
In the cool labyrinth of distant years. 
To watch your casual graces change. To know 
Your true, translucent charm is chained to art. 
To feel a brittle strangeness come and go, 
Locking the careless freedom of your heart. 
This is the hour all lovely youth must pass. 
O looming death of beauty in the glass!"

We are the beauties of the sonnet, ode, 
Lyric and legendary ballad. Who 
Will envy us, bent with our dreary load 
Of age, or grudge to us our simple due? - 
To strike all young and lovely, charming things 
Who innocently show what once we were. 
Our haggard jealousy shall claw their wings 
And send their beauties down the spiteful air. 
Yes, we will leave a legacy of hate, 
Surfeit of innuendo, dearth of truth, 
For all who come a generation late 
To rival us in loveliness and youth. 
We are afraid - and shall make others fear 
The undiverted winter of the year.
We hear the geese go whistling overhead.  
We are familiar with their autumn song,  
To flutes when the first rowan leaves are red,  
To clanging cymbals when the frost grows strong  
And they grow arrogant. But then we know  
That they are led  
By custom and by folly; they debate  
Extravaganzas in the falling snow  
And fly against the sun in spring-time. So  
We wait. We can afford to wait.

Grounded, we watch your flying, hungrily;  
Your dipped wings banking, or your powerful, steep  
Climb into heaven, while your engines keep  
Drowning their echo in the throbbing air,  
As if the sky could never shake them free.  
And we're not there - and we're not there!

Wings, peace, speed, beauty; these were once ours, too,  
The shadows, winds, the world beneath us. Proud,  
We soared down sun-swept avenues of cloud  
And sang the stormy glories of the sky.  
And now that happiness is ended - through -  
We've had it. We are not to fly.

We flew in battle. Sometimes we regret  
That cold and starry, war-deep grave elect,  
The death we side-slipped. We did not expect,  
Somehow, our choice of life would come to cost  
All the joy, all the freedom pilots get,  
The flame, the wings that we have lost.

Bored by the days' pedestrian deceit,  
Tied by the bitter leash of earth, we strain  
To live our flying memories again.  
Dust dims the edges of our sharp delight,  
And time has power, we find, even to cheat  
The deathless loveliness of flight.
The wild geese find their loch, the night-wind drops. The crows, ungainly, watch with chilly eyes. The fields and hedgerows for a stir of life, or stare, heads slanted wisely at the sky, for weather omens. Dawn comes coldly up, lighting the hoodies' motley grey and black. Their sudden, circus juggling when they launch with wingtip-tilted, aerobatic ease. Harsh voices break the stillness of the air, in humorous comment to their watching mates. They are not ruffle-feathered dowagers, nor dons, nor grounded pilots, when their croak rises and fades. They have no use for those conceits, for they are crows, are crows...crows...crows.