

## Charles Molesworth: On "The Pangolin"

Moore's artistry reaches a peak with "The Pangolin," in large part because it shows her ability to merge inner values and outer surfaces with playful ingenuity and yet serious intent. From the poem's opening phrase--"Another armoured animal"--we hear that tone of surety that results when an artist has come to know fully her material and to have seen that it fully serves her thematic aims. In some ways "The Pangolin" is the most positive, self-possessed poem of the book which shares its title. But its tensions and ironies are present, and they reverberate with the knowledge of the preceding four poems. By using animal grace as the ostensible subject in all five poems, Moore skillfully mediates between the concern with civic virtue and the complexities of the artistic vocation. Many modernist poems and poets are notable for their separation of the artistic and civil realms, and Moore herself has often been discussed as if she had little or no interest in public matters outside of manners and decorum. Her concern with decorum, however, as well as her concern with perceptual accuracy and artistic responsiveness, have a moral dimension that is fulfilled on a public scale. Too often, I think, Moore's concern with armoring and armored animals has been taken to suggest something like hermeticism, as if the armor were equivalent to the monk's walls in his cell. But armor was designed to allow people to go into the world, not avoid it. And so, I think, Moore understood it. The pangolin is a nocturnal, isolated animal, stealthy and seldom seen, but its solitariness is in the service of genuine virtues: patience, skill, the wise use of strength. These virtues have social consequences in the human realm, and so what the pangolin emblemizes through its poetic representation is a didactically important awareness for existing in the human world.

The witty equation between pangolin and artist gets a playful introduction in the poem's opening stanza:

This near artichoke  
with head and legs and grit-equipped giz-  
zard, the night miniature artist-  
engineer, is Leonardo's  
indubitable son? Im-  
pressive animal  
and toiler, of whom we seldom hear.

The pedigree, as it were, is a conditioned one, for the pause after "is" indicates not only hesitation but an awareness of the implausible nature of the identification with Leonardo even if it's only through paternal lineage. (The "is" is also highlighted by the comic rhyme with the jutting "giz" of two lines previous.) Note, too, how Moore first locates her metaphoric frame in

the world of nature, with the artichoke, before turning to the world of culture with Leonardo. The pangolin is not only a dreamy artist figure, but an "artist-engineer," a creature who masters its environment by purposive activity. This constitutes one connection with the explorer figure of "Virginia Britannia," and while we "seldom hear" of the pangolin, in contrast to John Smith's self-publicizing, the animal has some of the explorer's inconsistency, for it is later described as "Fearful yet to be feared."

Having begun the identification of animal and artist with her usual tentative touch, Moore is freed to explore the pangolin's habits in a way that can easily be read as an allegory of the moon-struck romantic artist, even down to his propensity to have his activity and character imaged forth as yet another art form while he explores the world on his own aesthetic terms. We enjoy several levels of identification when he:

endures

exhausting solitary

trips through unfamiliar ground at night

returning before sunrise; stepping

in the moonlight, on the moonlight

peculiarly, that the out-

side edges of his

hands may bear the weight and save the claws

for digging. Serpented about

the tree, he draws

away from

danger unpugnaciously,

with no sound but a harmless hiss; keep-

ing the fragile grace of the Thomas-

of Leighton-Buzzard Westminster

Abbey wrought iron vine, or

rolls himself into a ball that has

power to defy all effort

to unroll it ....

Again, a pause after the first moonlight suggests Moore is about to lift the level of suspended disbelief needed to tease out the implications of the animal's grace. The economy of the animal/artist is what is perhaps most striking, how he saves his claws for digging, how he allows only a "harmless hiss" to express his fear and disregard, and how, like the durably wrought ironwork of the Abbey's tomb, his fragility is in part illusory. It is no wonder that Moore can end a stanza with a peroration in which the ability to live and even prosper in alternating states can be the distinctive mark of both man and animal. The lines recall one of Moore's favorite authors, Sir Thomas Browne, and his desire to live in "divided and distinguished worlds":

Sun and moon & day and night &  
man and beast  
each with a splen-  
dour which man  
in all his vileness cannot  
set aside; each with an excellence!

Here Moore echoes not only Hamlet's awareness of man's divided nature but also her own phrase from another poem: "life's faulty excellence." This stanza ending also anticipates the poem's closing lines, where the sun is addressed as an "alternating blaze." Again, Moore may have Stevens' "Sunday Morning" in mind, with its concern that humanness is inextricably tied up with alternation, and that any single unchanging state would be insipid. But it is also her sense of fallenness, the particular texture of human virtue--its excellencies and its limitations--that is richly conveyed in the poem's structure.

It is directly to man's character that Moore turns in the poem's last three stanzas, not altogether abandoning the allegorical framework of animal grace, but emboldened enough to speak directly in a way that is altogether rather unique in her poetry. Though she draws an industrious picture of where "Beneath sun and moon, man slave[s]/to make his life more sweet," Moore is wry enough to point out that he "leaves half the/flowers worth having." She goes on to emblemize various human traits through the agencies of animal graces, until she presents him as "capsizing in // disheartenment." Drawing back from this near-tragic sense, Moore resorts to some grammatical complexity and mingles it with some Cummings-like typographical wit in order to leaven the theme's piecemeal presentation before the finale:

Bedizened or stark  
naked, man, the self, the being

so-called human, writing-  
master to this world, griffons a dark  
'Like does not like like that is  
obnoxious'; and writes error [sic] with four  
r's. Among animals, one has a  
sense of humor ....

Again, commentary might exfoliate endlessly here, starting with the slight echo from King Lear to the way that last wry sentence does and does not include man among the animals. But it is important to note that now man is the "writing-master," and so literature has a didactic function that links the aesthetic with the ethical. In this one instance, what is written is gnomic, since the verb "griffons" suggests that the sentiment expressed is both heraldic and hybrid. In either case, the note of dislike and the obnoxious reminds us of our fallenness, and the fact that the species, simply by being a set of "like" creatures, does not guarantee peace for itself. (Moore had earlier said, in her array of animal emblems of human traits, that man was "in fighting, mechanicked/like the pangolin." Perhaps she had Leonardo's many militaristic "inventions" in mind.)

The final stanza is a marvel of structural subtlety, as it refers equally to the pangolin and man, an equivocation made possible by the closing lines of the penultimate stanza. The equivocation perhaps turns wittiest with the lines "Consistent with the/formula--warm blood, no gills,/two pairs of hands and a few hairs--that/is a mammal; there he sits in his/own habitat." Part of the humor here is the way the Dickinson-like use of riddle is called on to question the "formula" about mammalian identity, a very touchy point in biology. The pangolin might easily be taken for a reptile, but his features fit the mammalian formula sufficiently, even though they also allow him to be described in a way that applies with almost equal accuracy to humans. (Luckily we have one pair of hands and one of feet.) George Plank's drawing at the start of the poem shows a pangolin in a tree under the moon; the drawing at the end of the poem shows a man, clasping his face in his hands under a blazing sun. Even more than the merging of the horse and the butterfly in "Half Deity," here the identification of the two main subjects of the poem is very much to the point of the poem's argument. As Moore says earlier in the poem, "To explain grace requires/a curious hand." We might even speculate that she was using "curious" here in both its seventeenth century sense of finely and intricately wrought as well as the modern sense of desiring knowledge. In either case, the identification of man and pangolin is indeed curious.

Moore concludes the poem with a description that continues the semantic balancing act of referring equally to man and animal and again heightens the irony by having the affirmative salutation be uttered from a very bleak context.

The prey of fear; he, always

curtailed, extinguished,  
thwarted by the dusk, work partly done,  
says to the alternating blaze,  
'Again the sun!  
anew each  
day; and new and new and new,  
that comes into and steadies my soul."

The way Moore suspends the main verb "says" at some distance from the subject "he" allows the intervening four appositive clauses to wall in, as it were, the speaking subject. The clauses are semantically involved with forms of limitation and the air of failure, and the address is to a blaze that is far from steady. Yet the moral affirmation of the salutation itself leaps out at us from this set of fallen conditions in a way that speaks to the issues raised throughout the book. The sentiment, normally spoken with a cloying piety, is here saved from what might have been its own rhetorical excess by that special mixture of innocence and experience that has served to balance the speaker's authority and winsomeness, in large measure by the self-consciousness of her modes of representation.

We can hear this struggle between the tonal possibilities of affirmation--Moore being too much a modernist to indulge what Pound called the "emotional slither" of late Victorianism--as earlier in the poem we find a most complex sentence in a lyric poem that has more than one to offer.

If that which  
is at all were not for  
ever, why would those who graced the spires  
with animals and gathered  
there to rest, on cold luxurious  
low stone seats--a monk and monk and monk--  
between the thus ingenious roof-  
supports, have slaved to confuse  
grace with a kindly  
manner, time in which to pay a debt,

the cure for sins, a graceful use  
of what are yet  
approved stone  
mullions branching out across  
the perpendiculars?

The opening complex subjunctive clause here, if turned into a declarative sentence, would claim that all that which has existed is eternal, or at least that the human effort to make art in the service of glory and ideals will in its way last forever. One recalls Stevens' line from "Peter Quince At The Clavier," "The body dies; the body's beauty lives." Note, too, the gothic sculptors' penchant for intermingling animals and man, surely one feature that induced Moore to incorporate this part of the theme into the poem. But the sculptors "slaved to confuse grace" in two senses, the supernatural and the animal, for both forms of grace are evoked in what follows. A kindly manner, in strictest theological accounting, is normally not supposed to be confused with the cure for sins, but if this passage is, as I would claim it is, Moore's most direct religious statement, it is also direct in her uniquely indirect way. Modernism has often been defined as a thoroughly secular movement, one that eschews all traditionally transcendent affirmations, with the exception of the aesthetic. Moore here rather craftily enters a religious claim--at least to the extent that all claims about eternal existence are essentially religious--but of course does so in a context of human art, and in the act of describing perpendiculars and stone mullions.

We also have in this passage yet another of the poem's pauses, in this case before the word "ingenious" and after the word "thus." In rhyming both words with "luxurious" two lines previous, Moore triangulates a sort of aesthetic argument: luxurious--thus--ingenious. Furthermore, the poet has indulged in an oxymoron by having the stone seats made luxurious; the gothic sculpture possesses a sort of baroque richness, at least in Moore's aesthetic probings of it. But I don't think there is any puritanical censure implied against the mediaeval style, but rather the opposite. Moore's isolation as an artist might be due to her over-ingenuity, her ability to indulge in a play with and among various aesthetic sensibilities. While she has a carefully worked out aesthetic of her own, her ability to appreciate other modes and styles in art is truly catholic, in the strict sense. She is capable of responding to the refinements of Oriental art and the American vernacular. However concerned she was with the problem of an indigenous American cultural style, she was, in the best modernist way, an internationalist. The "yet approved" mullions are aesthetically pleasing beyond their origin in scholasticism or religious piety, and we sense that Moore delighted in the mere grace of their "branching out." Such a refined and disinterested aesthetic delight is not likely to find mass approval in an industrial age generally stripped of historical consciousness and formal ingenuity. While Moore does not indulge in the anti-mechanistic jeremiads of such modernists as Lawrence, she must have known that in some sense the limit on the size of her audience was self-imposed.

From gothic sculpture and the animal grace of a rare mammal, Moore has stitched her Venetian tapestry out of peasant material. But from the start these poems have been busy implicating the worlds of culture and history as well as the realms of nature and art for not only

do we have stone mullions and a "true ant-eater," we have Thomas-of-Leighton-Buzzard vines and John Smith's ostrich. Moore was a voracious reader, and an equally voracious watcher of natural history films. Throughout all her reading she struggled with the conflicts between her modernist aesthetic and her traditional morality, a morality grounded in a religious faith with which she was never simply at ease. In *The Pangolin*, and perhaps most impressively in the title poem, she achieved that rare sort of balance between inner conflicts and outer symmetries. In part the achievement came from a mastery of will, a self-discipline in working out the thematic consequences of her visions without abandoning didactic goals or stinting on artistic delights. In this she has made a masterpiece out of her struggles. We should let her animal language have the final word:

Pangolins are  
not aggressive animals; between  
dusk and day, they have the not un-  
chainlike, machine-  
like form and  
frictionless creep of a thing  
made graceful by adversities, con-  
versities.

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