

## Darlene Williams Erickson: On "The Pangolin"

Technically "The Pangolin" is a wonder of architectural construction. Composed of nine stanzas of eleven lines each (with one notable exception; stanza 5 has only ten lines), each stanza operates with a predictable, although not identical, syllable count, as follows:

| Line | Syllables | Line | Syllables |
|------|-----------|------|-----------|
| 1    | 8-9       | 7    | 13-15     |
| 2    | 14-16     | 8    | 8-3       |
| 3    | 7-9       | 9    | 4-5       |
| 4    | 16-17     | 10   | 9-10      |
| 5    | 12-13     | 11   | 9-10      |
| 6    | 11-13     |      |           |

The rhyme scheme is a b a c c d e d f g, although the rhyme is often more approximate than exact, somewhat akin to the harmonics of a stringed instrument (e.g., "scale/central," "gizzard/engineer is," "Thomas-/has," "nest/beast," "body-plates/retaliates," "pangolin/special skin"). And Moore's architectural forms do not impose themselves arbitrarily upon word structure and sentence structure. They are part of the very texture of the poem's meaning. As a matter of fact, neither the syllabic rhythm nor the rhyme is at all obvious to the reader. Even one sensitive to prosody must make an effort to hear it. The effect is gentle and unobtrusive, almost like background music, but its progress signals the feelings of the poem very much like the score of an opera or of a motion picture. The hypnotic rhythm is carefully orchestrated by the poet, an expertise long in Moore's repertoire.

In "Feeling and Precision" she echoed Bergson's theory of the poet's ability to "put to sleep the active or rather resistant powers of our personality, and thus bring us into a state of perfect responsiveness" when she spoke of the poet's control of sound and rhythm operating as a kind of hypnosis. Moore wrote of her predilection for original rhythmic devices in a 1944 essay.

My own fondness for the unaccented rhyme derives, I think, from an instinctive effort to insure naturalness.... One notices the wholesomeness of the uncapitalized beginnings of lines, and the gusto of invention, with climax proceeding out of climax, which is the mark of feeling.

We call climax a device, but is it not the natural result of strong feeling? It is, moreover, a pyramid that can rest either on its point or on its base. . . . Intentional anticlimax as a department of surprise is a subject by itself; indeed, an art, "bearing," as Longinus says, "the stamp of vehement emotion like a ship before a veering wind," both as content and as sound; but especially as sound, in the use of which the poet becomes a kind of hypnotist--recalling Kenneth Burke's statement that "the hypnotist has a way out and a way in."

So from Moore's perspective, what at first might seem only prose cast on the page in an imposed and artificial verse form is actually intricately constructed and controlled verse made to read as natural speech ("when I am as complete as I like to be, I seem unable to get an effect plain enough"). Moore speaks of climax proceeding out of climax and intentional anticlimax, all blowing the reader along like a ship before a veering wind, and that is exactly what the formal rhythms of the poem accomplish.

For example, as Elizabeth Bradburn points out in her brilliant essay "The Machinery of Grace," the poem proceeds "climax out of climax, rising and falling in tension as it moves forward. Furthermore, the rhyme is not only concealed, but itself a form of climax." The first climax occurs at line 4 with the signal of an exclamation point at "tail row!" Then it subsides into a more natural rhythm until it begins to rise again, signaled by a series of strong monosyllables connected by a series of repeated conjunctions, a form Moore uses several times in the poem to punctuate the rhythm.

with head and legs and grit-equipped gizzard (line 4)

Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast (line 30)

as prop or hand or broom or ax (line 46)

a monk and monk and monk (line 59)

warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs (line 91)

anew day day; and new and new and new (line 97)

There is also a rhythmic climax matching meaning in stanza 8.

[ . . . ]

The rhythmic peak at "power to grow" shows that the lines themselves have power to grow and that these human creatures stimulate the poet, making her breathe faster and become more erect, that is, experience poetic growth and insight.

The most important climactic moment in the poem is carefully prepared for in the poem's form. It is stanza 5, which has only ten lines, compared with eleven in all others. There is also a change in the rhyme scheme. A d rhyme closes the rhyme scheme, which until now has been left open. Breaking the rhythm and changing the rhyme scheme effectively breaks the pace and prepares the reader for the internal climax of the entire poem, the rhetorical question of lines 56-65, which begins: "If that which is at all were not forever." As Bradburn points out, that important question is poised between two shorter statements: "To explain grace requires / a curious hand" (lines 55-56) and "A sailboat / was the first machine" (lines 65-66). Bradburn calls the scheme of alternation in stanza 5 a "coiled spring" which triggers the theme of the poem: the "sprawling energetic question about grace." This is what Moore means by "interiorized climax." (I return to the theme itself elsewhere in this discussion.)

Stylistically, stanza melts into stanza as lines flow across the barriers of stanza endings in elaborate enjambment. One is particularly struck in the maverick stanza 5, the ten-line stanza, by the verse ending with the hyphenated "con-" followed by "versities" to begin stanza 6. The reader is forced to read with greater concentration, guided by the rhythms of the poetry itself. The reader's senses are driven by that kind of "pleasing, jerky progress" that Moore relished.

But, I would argue further, the technical complexities complement the meaning of the poem itself, "climax proceeding out of climax." One almost senses here Moore's deliberate refutation of Monroe's charge that her work showed little curve of growth or climax. And her declaration that climax is really "the natural result of strong feeling" may respond to Monroe's declaration that Moore had only a "heart of brass." One wonders too if two lines from "The Pangolin"-- "Among animals, one has a sense of humor. / Humor saves a few steps, it saves years"--just might be, in a subtle way, a firm stand against Monroe's old charge of "grim and haughty humor."

In order to clarify further the connections between form and meaning, one must first look for Moore's intent in "The Pangolin." The opening lines already provide a link.

Another armored animal-scale

lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they

form the uninterrupted central

tail row.

The poem itself has a similar kind of armor made of words, line lapping line with real regularity until the poem's center, stanza 5, the "uninterrupted central / tail row."

The first half of the poem is a precise description of the pangolin, a creature which Moore calls "another armored animal." Many readings of this poem have centered on that opening phrase. Is this merely another in Moore's series of poems about armored animals? Or does Moore see in the creature a likeness to herself, a woman who feels safest when she places herself "behind armor," in a self-effacing and self-protective way? The answer, I would argue, is neither. As Bradburn has suggested, an alternative reading might well be that Moore compares herself to the pangolin, "not as an emotionally armored woman, but as an artist" as I have suggested earlier, Moore shared the role of artist with all sensitive human beings.

Moore has collected a great deal of exact information about pangolins. In the notes she directs her reader to two good sources: Robert T. Hatt's Natural History, (December 1935), and Lydeker's Royal Natural History, although the poetic text alone is rich with detail. If one has never seen a picture of a pangolin, her visual comparison with an artichoke is of great assistance. For the first half of the poem, Moore offers both visual close-ups and distance shots, as we note everything from the "closing ear-ridge" to a pangolin's serpentine position around a tree. We can even watch the creature's movement in the mind's eye, as it carefully walks on

. . . the outside

edges of his hands ... and save[s] the claws

for digging.

The pangolin is always armored, for it can roll "himself into a ball that has / power to defy all effort to unroll it." We watch the creature's precision, "stepping in the moonlight, / on the moonlight" to be even more exact. Everything the pangolin does outside its nest happens at night; it is a nocturnal creature, a "night miniature artist engineer," a clue to which the reader will want to return.

Moore is always searching for perfect--and refreshing--means of comparison. For example, she notes that pangolins look like spruce cones and artichokes, and that the "fragile grace of the Thomas- / of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron vine" she had seen in a 1922 visit to Westminster Abbey was similar to the pangolin's scales. Each represented a delicately wrought armor. She included another work of art in wrought iron--"Picador," by Pablo Gargallo (1928), on display at the Museum of Modern Art--and remembered the gallant attitude of the matador as he "walk[ed] away / unhurt."

The precision and detail of everything are vivid and memorable. We see, for example, that

. . . the flattened sword-

edged leafpoints on the tail and artichoke set leg- and body-

plates

quivering violently when it retaliates.

One even hears a "harmless hiss" as the pangolin draws away from danger. Like the visual artist, Moore offers exact details, what A. Kingsley Weatherhead describes as feeling expressed by concrete images. Hugh Kenner's assessment of Moore's descriptive technique as "experience of the eye" is also generally correct.

In her poems, things utter puns to the senses. These, registered in words, make odd corrugations on the linguistic surface.... This policy of accurate comparison ... does not worry about congruousness, much as Braque did not worry about perspective, being intent on a different way of filling its elected spaces. Congruity, like perspective, deals in proportion with an overall view. Miss Moore's poems deal in many separate acts of attention all close up; optical puns, seen by snapshot, in a poetic normally governed by the eye, sometimes by the ears and fingers, ultimately by the moral sense.

But Kenner errs, I believe, in one particular: although Moore's poems do deal with many separate acts of attention, many of them very close up, there is an overall view, a congruity; the poem is not nearly as depersonalized as it may at first appear. The separate acts of

attention are related to one another and are working toward a general impression active in the mind of the poet.

In *The Edge of the Image*, A. Kingsley Weatherhead is one of the few critics who understands that "strong emotion is unquestionably present in [Moore's] poems," but he feels that the imagery is not a correlative for it in the sense of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative. That is to suggest that the imagery, as Monroe had suggested about the form, is somehow outside of Moore's intent, existing of and for itself. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Both the imagery and the separate acts of attention contribute to the theme that Moore has so carefully pointed out with her formal devices: "To explain grace requires / a curious hand" and "If that which is at all were not forever." Recalling that with Moore words often operate in a kaleidoscope of meanings, one must begin to amplify both "grace" and "curious." Curious can mean odd, but it can also mean inquisitive. An archaic meaning, but one Moore surely would have intended is "made or prepared skillfully, done with painstaking accuracy or attention to detail." It is in all of these senses that Moore sends out her filaments of thought. "To explain grace requires a curious hand," whether one is describing the grace of a peculiar armored animal, a pangolin, or grace in its many meanings, several of which Moore includes later in the poem. The writer who would take the time to describe the grace of anything must be inquisitive, attentive to detail, and maybe even a little odd. ("Humor saves a few steps, it saves years.") The one who would create the "machinery"--the words, the rhythms, and the forms to describe grace--must have "a curious hand." Like the pangolin, that one must be an "artist engineer . . . Leonardo Da Vinci's replica," that "impressive animal and toiler of whom we seldom hear." (The nocturnal pangolin is a "night miniature artist engineer.") The pangolin and the man are Leonardo Da Vinci's replica not only in that they are both artists and engineers but also in that they are both described in precise detail, like Da Vinci's famous illustrations of the human body, an engineer's hand "explaining grace." Moore has done for the pangolin what Da Vinci did for the human being. Thus Moore is clearly establishing threads of likeness and connection between the pangolin and the artist.

Actually, Moore is reaching even higher. She is trying to demonstrate the real likenesses and value of all creatures in a scheme far larger than the world of either pangolins or humans.

[lines 34-37]

This idea is an ancient concept of God's creation that has permeated science and literature since the time of Plato: the Great Chain of Being. The concept views all of creation from God to the lowest form of matter as essentially good and as existing in a hierarchical and interconnected system, with humankind occupying the middle rung. Nothing is vile, although various human philosophical systems might have declared it so. Thus whether one speaks of the sun and moon or man and beast, each has a "splendor" and an "excellence" because it has come from God, the Author of all that is good, all that is grace-full.

On the complex subject of grace, Moore asks a rhetorical question.

[lines 62-65]

have slaved to pursue the many meanings of grace: a kindly manner, time in which to pay a debt, the cure for sins, elegance, a graceful style of architecture? What would be the use of knowing and describing what is good and kind, efficient and beautiful if there were no ultimate good?

Moore raises us to the crest of a great climax with this question and then surprises us with what might seem an illogical response: "A sailboat / was the first machine." "Pangolins," she adds,

[lines 74-77]

The thought shifts suddenly from sailboats to pangolins to human beings, who share a surprising number of traits with other creatures; the human is:

[lines 82-86]

But humans do not usually like these kinds of comparisons. After all, they are superior beings, acting as the "writing- / master[s] to this world," even if they sometimes make silly mistakes like writing "error with four / r's." Moore's reminder of human frailty makes us laugh and brings back some realistic humility. Fortunately for humans, they do have risibility, a sense of humor about their own place in the universe--and "Humor saves a few steps, it saves years." Human beings are "unignorant / modest and unemotional, and all emotion." Most of all they have "everlasting vigor" and "power to grow"--potential, the possibility to be more than we already are; they have hope based on the faith that all there is, is forever.

Given the basic design, "warm blood, no gills, two pair of hands and a few hairs," the human sits "in his own habitat, / serge-clad, strongshod." (Note how Moore is establishing the same kind of objectivity about this armored animal that she has already exhibited toward the pangolin; but there is one vast difference: this creature has a mind and the gift of hope.) Although humans have enough intelligence to know fear and to become discouraged, they are also blessed in that they can say to the alternating blaze,

Again the sun!

anew each day; and new and new and new,  
that comes into and steadies my soul.

The poem ends with a climax of grand proportions, a climax of hope bred of deep emotion, Harriet Monroe notwithstanding.

And the poem has also moved from darkness, the nocturnal world of the pangolin, "who endures / exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night" and who lives in a "nest / of rocks closed with earth from inside," to a world wherein a human person greets the alternating blaze, "Again the sun!" If even pangolins are susceptible to happiness and theirs is a toil worked out in darkness, how much more is possible for humans, who are even closer to the Light.

But one must return for a moment to the odd line of response to the central rhetorical question about the possibility of eternity, "A sailboat / was the first machine." Taffy Martin points out that this "cryptic answer seems to answer nothing at all." But Martin's instincts about the importance of this line to the full meaning of the poem are correct. Moore uses the term "machine-like" earlier in the poem.

[lines 57-61]

(Recall too that she calls the pangolin an "artist engineer.") In Moore's value system, to be "machine-like" is a beautiful compliment, meaning well made, efficient, and graceful. Moore has a spiritual appreciation for that which is well engineered, like pangolins (designed by God) and sailboats (made by the first machine-makers) and meticulously crafted wrought-iron vines or even poetry (made by artist-engineers). The pangolin's "frictionless creep" foreshadows the graceful efficiency of the first machine, the sailboat, perhaps somewhat akin to what Longinus noted about "the stamp of vehement emotion [moved] like a ship before a veering wind." Through the "machinery" of her poetry (which critics like Monroe had found so contrived), Moore has done a curious thing: she has described grace, that which is found in both pangolins and humans. She has also, in her gentle way, complimented the Author of all grace. The pangolin embodies many of the most important qualities of grace: quietness, compactness, orderliness, efficiency, exactness--the very qualities of Moore's own style of poetry, which she can "engineer"--by the grace of God.

In "The Pangolin" Moore has thus moved well beyond the examination of armor she had made in "Black Earth." She has made forays outside the elephant skin (although she connects with it in lines 50-52.

[ . . . ]

She understands now that Madam Merle had a point, that "there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances." "Armor [only] seems extra." And the poet's art is the poet's armor. According to Bradburn, "The poet obscures himself not as an effort to be objective, not out of personal morality with regard to the 'other,' but because to create at all is to build armor around oneself. This is not an erasure of self, but a kind of self-definition." It is a projection, a feat of engineering; it is one's armorial coat. It is Pavlova's "Prima Ballerina Absoluta." The armor signals the presence, not the absence, of the self. In a manner of speaking, in making a piece of art, artists make themselves. But both the art and the act celebrate the grace that was given to complete the task.

There is no way one can deny Moore's deep faith in a power beyond herself. It is always there, from the very beginning. The articulation of that confidence, the power of that faith to signal order and reason over chaos, has always been difficult in the twentieth century. Unlike the faith-filled worlds of a Dante or a Milton, Moore lived in a world in which an intellectual had to proceed cautiously when talking about faith, but she did proceed. She did not see the world as a wasteland or vile or in need of ideas of order. As a good Presbyterian, she saw the entire universe as an expression of the kingdom of heaven in the world. And she saw sailboats and pangolins as part of that kingdom. Moore found the Deity's reflected beauty, order, and grace in everything, even in pangolins.

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