

Laurel Rayburn
March 24, 2010
Chapter One, Draft #1

Lyric Hospitalities: Description and Voice as Guests in Marianne Moore's Poetry

I. Introduction

“Chiasmus, the symmetrical structure of prosopopoeia, entails that, by making the dead speak, the living are struck dumb, they too become the monument” --Michael Riffaterre

“If it were not for guests, all houses would be graves.” --Kahlil Gibran

This chapter will look at the relationship between voice and description in Marianne Moore's poetry. “Voice” is a particularly vexed term in the context of Moore in large part due to her penchant for culling text from other sources. This first conception of “voice,” then, has to do with the way we recognize other texts as “voices” from outside the poem. The second conception of voice I take from a long line of deconstructive criticism, which locates the figure of voice (notably apostrophe or prosopopoeia) as the quintessential marker of lyric. For these critics, the figure of voice is endowed with the power to animate—a capacity that is often invoked to argue for lyric's distinction in contrast to narrative forms. The first “voice” can be understood as closely related to dramatic monologue; the second in many ways calls attention to the limitations of dramatic monologue in foregrounding hypothetical or impossible kinds of speech acts. Jonathan Culler has famously argued for the critical place of the apostrophic in defining lyric, but this privilege is accorded precisely because apostrophe does what “fictional representations of plausible historical speech acts” (39) can't do: “its empty ‘O’ devoid of semantic reference, is the figure of voice, a sign of utterance, and yet, as a *figure* of voicing, quite resistant to attempts to treat the poem as a fictive representation of personal utterance” (40). The artifice of the apostrophic figure declares its distance from voice as a fictional representation of a subject.

Although Moore is often identified as a “lyric” poet, the history of Moore criticism has never strayed from its claim for her great “precision”; since T.S. Eliot, critics have glossed Moore as “descriptive.” My sense is that Moore’s descriptive mode in some way informs the two uses of “voice” identified above. Although Michael Riffaterre (following Paul De Man) opposes the declarative (descriptive or narrative) with the suppositive (lyric), for Moore, these two modes often function in similar ways. My suggestion is not only that descriptive and lyric modes exist side by side in Moore’s work, but the entrance into the space of lyric has further consequences for the fate of description. By this I mean that descriptive words and phrases do not necessarily serve to “actualize the system of signs” (Riffaterre 112)—do not maintain the status of “description” as declarative as Riffaterre would have it—but transform upon their entrance into the house of lyric. The possibility of a voice given to the voiceless object suggests that rendering an object through the descriptive mode is checked by that object’s potential to speak itself. Description accords an object its object status, and yet, within the space of the poem, that possibility always exists for the object’s voice to displace the descriptive mode altogether. In the position of host, lyric renders the declarative contingent.

In Moore we may begin to see that description itself has a directional component. Although the descriptive mode does not explicitly speak *to another* (as apostrophe does) in Moore’s poems, the way it is often subject to correction suggests its contingency; moreover, it also anticipates its correction *from* the direction of the very object it describes. This does not necessarily mean that the object itself speaks—most of the time it does not—but the tendency for description to “actualize a system of signs”—to render an object its object status—is put in check by the poem’s tendency to make visible that part of description which will not lay still. It is here that I see the intersections of figures of voice and descriptive modes. According to Riffaterre’s

reading of De Man, prosopopeia finds its corollary in chiasmus, since a voice implies an addressee who may or may not respond: “chiasmus, the symmetrical structure of prosopopeia, entails that, by making the dead speak, the living are struck dumb, they too become the monument. Prosopopeia thus stakes out a figural space for the chiasmic interpretation: either the subject will take over the object, or it will be penetrated by the object” (112). For Moore, even in a poem in which prosopopeia is not explicitly invoked, this chiasmic relationship often directs its formal potential, such that descriptive language is subject to the same logic that applies to the figure of voice within the chiasmic structure. This is especially evident in Moore insofar as she often invokes the voice of another for the sake of description.

In many ways, what we might see as the inverse of prosopopeia is at least as present in Moore as prosopopeia itself. That is, if prosopopeia endows the inanimate with voice, Moore also makes speech into the inanimate: the voices she harnesses from outside the poem, within the space of the poem often constitute the object itself. Moore’s oeuvre is filled with countless examples of this, one being the first line of “To a Snail”: “If ‘compression is the first grace of style,’ / you have it” (275). Here, the quotation marks signal the importation of words from outside the poem, and insofar as Moore’s notes (sometimes) refer the reader to a source author and text, these words can in a sense be read as another voice. At the same time, as I believe this example shows, the term “heteroglossic” cannot account for Moore’s use of other voices. This is because “heteroglossic” necessarily refers to the representation of many voices; it implies that the poem is constituted by these voices and that its aesthetic aim is in part to *give* them voice. “Heteroglossic” attaches voice to an autonomous speaking subject who may then be represented among others. In “To A Snail,” the words “compression is the first grace of style,” become descriptors upon their entrance into the poem. While the quotation marks and Moore’s notes cue

the reader that these words didn't originate with Moore, their function within the terms of the poem is to describe the snail rather than represent a voice for the sake of its own representation, or give "hearing." In these particular lines, the apostrophe also suggests the potential animation of the snail; within the confines of the poem, the snail is a more likely candidate as second speaker than the translator of *Demetrius on Style* (from which Moore drew the quotation).

Moore's quotes always are in use of something. In these lines especially, Moore takes a line that could be an apology for poetry ("compression is the first grace of style") and makes it describe a snail. I am suggesting that these words call attention to their status as both voice and description, and in so doing, call into question the assumption that these two modes function primarily in opposition to one another.

It is perhaps not mere coincidence that a snail, of all creatures, is known to "carry his home on his back"—a trait that allows him to remain comfortably his own master amidst both changes of circumstance and radical shifts of literary mode. My claims follow from the premise that descriptive language is more "at home" in narrative fiction than in lyric poetry, and voice unattached to a body or even sensory perception, is more "at home" in lyric poetry than in narrative fiction. This premise is clearly consistent with De Manian assumptions about lyric forms. Moore's poems, however, continually force us to ask what emerges when words "lodge" away from home. The hospitality relationship helps to explain both the way that disparate discursive utterances change upon their contact with one another, but also how they exist in an asymmetric relation. Two modes once opposed shift and change one another; what is more, spaces of animation themselves shift. In Gibran's formulation, guests reverse the process of decay, rendering what would be a grave, a life-giving space. If lyric modes are already marked by their animation, what happens when the descriptive enters into them? My goal in the pages

that follow is to reevaluate the complexities of animation's shifting modes—to see how Moore's hosts and guests behave in a house filled with voices.

II. Capsizing

“This is the double law of hospitality: to calculate the risks, yes, but without closing the door on the incalculable, that is, on the future and the foreigner” –Jacques Derrida (*Parallax* 6).

“...in fighting, mechanicked / like the pangolin; capsizing in disheartenment”—Marianne Moore

Moore's "The Pangolin" is in my reading a poem about the limits of description. It begins as an observation of the animal, a detailed description and praise the armored "true ant-eater." As many critics have noted, this poem begins by welcoming in the language of natural history, a kind of scientific prose foreign to poetry; the first line, "Another armored animal" seems to borrow the language of a natural history text as though the poem to follow were an encyclopedic entry describing one animal among others of similar kind. "Precise" detail suggests a close-up lens: "scale-lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity." The poem is typical of Moore in that she takes an object strange to her reader and begins by introducing it. It is at this level that the poem invites the reader to read it as description. At the same time, the poem quickly shifts in ways that call our attention to the boundary of description. And ultimately, description itself becomes part of a shifting, circular context; it shows itself as always embedded within a chiasmic structure. As if to call attention to the grammatical hierarchy at work in any description, the poem enacts a kind of syntactic overturning such that the descriptors turn into objects to be described and objects described take on the role of descriptors. By the end of the poem, the pangolin turns to "like a pangolin," a figure invoked merely to describe a new object altogether: "man."

As with so many of Moore's poems, here too the poem shifts lenses abruptly moving from the close-up view to a kind of global distance. Thus, description of the pangolin like "rolls himself into a ball that has power to defy all efforts to unroll it" appear in close proximity to a

description like “Leonardo Da Vinci’s replica” (117). In the latter instance, the language matches the innovation of the pangolin’s strangeness with the bizarre, unexpected language of its own, reaching outside the pangolin’s habitat for words to describe it. Here there is a displacement across time and space, but also a generic displacement, as if Moore has exhausted the limits of one generic utterance—the natural history text—and must reach for another—in this case, the epic mode we associate with such allusions. Moore marks the limits of description as well at the level of grammar. Words invoked in the service of description are understood as contingent in terms of their syntactical position; description in the poem is never fully codified. A word that enters the poem as a descriptor—with an adjectival status—shifts such that it does not perpetually merely “serve” the nouns of the poem. The word “grace” functions in this way; in fact, the pangolin itself becomes a figure for how the word circumambulates. Early in the poem the pangolin is described: “serpented about the tree / he draws away from danger unpugnaciously” (117). As a figure “serpented,” the pangolin embodies that which spirals; it at once nearly returns again and again to the same site on a circle’s circumference, and yet it insistently moves vertically or laterally as well, defying the sameness of the original circle’s circumference. As a very specific—and very spatial—understanding of repetition with a difference, the spiraling action of the pangolin “describes” the logic of the poem’s linguistic repetitions.

The first instance of the word “grace” in the poem appears when the pangolin (“serpented about the tree”) is said to be “keeping 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” (117). The “fragile grace” thus describes the wrought-iron vine, which in turn describes the movement of the pangolin about the tree. Here, “grace” is a

modifier of the vehicle of which the pangolin is the tenor; although “grace” appears as a noun, it modifies the object which itself functions as the vehicle in the metaphoric structure—at least twice removed from the pangolin itself. And yet, as we will see, the word “grace” will “serpentine” about the poem, initially invited in by the observation of the pangolin, but eventually rolling back on itself. The serpentine pangolin and wrought-iron vine in this way figure for the transposition of words themselves. “Grace” reappears two more times before it temporarily loses its adjectival status and gaining the status of a conceptual idea, an idea which in turn displaces the pangolin as the poem’s central object of meditation. From its first iteration, the variations of the word “grace” move closer and closer to the body of the pangolin itself. If the first instance describes the wrought iron vine (which in turn describes the pangolin), the second appears in adjectival form, modifying “tool,” an appositive for the pangolin tail: “The giant-pangolin- / tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or ax” (118). In its third iteration, the pangolin’s “form” is “made graceful by adversities, con- / versities” (118). Here, the word “graceful” finally describes the pangolin itself, and yet, as near as it has moved to the poem’s ostensible object of meditation, this very nearness seems to reverse its syntactic status. In its next iteration, it has usurped the pangolin as the poem’s object of meditation: “To explain grace requires a curious hand” shifts the poem’s attention to just this proposition. In this way, the word “grace” functions like the animal that disappears and reappears as it “works down the tree,” a spiraling action that describes intermittent reappearances in different locations.

“Grace,” then, as means of describing the pangolin, refuses to stay in its place, refuses its status as mere means to an end. As the poem plays out all of the syntactic possibilities of this word, it also calls attention to the way that description itself refuses its role in “actualizing a system of signs.” Like a spiral growing narrower, “grace” consistently moves toward the body of

the pangolin until the proximity of its distance collapses the position of each. In a complete syntactical overturning, the poem turns its attention away from the pangolin to contemplate grace itself. Moreover, this shift of attention is accompanied by accumulated connotations of the word “hand” which renders the writer’s hand indistinguishable from the pangolin’s tail limb. When Moore writes that “to explain grace requires a curious hand” (118), the meaning of “hand” is immediately confused. The poem has referenced “hand” twice already; in the second instance, it has been in the service of describing the pangolin’s tail, “a graceful tool as prop or hand or broom or ax” (118). At a certain moment, then, the tail’s use is “hand”; in some sense, the “curious hand” that grace requires is actually the tail—an object which is not at all a writing hand and the very object which absolutely distinguishes the two mammals of the poem. The undecidability of limbs (hand and tail) suggests the way that Moore refuses a subject position that would define an object, but constructs a constant spiral of observed and observer, where their distinction is visible one moment and confused the next. The writing “hand” that would be said to describe the pangolin might just as likely be the pangolin’s tail; the object “actualized” by description at a certain moment is positioned as the writing subject. In fact, by the confusion of “hand” will be one of the first indications that man will displace pangolin as the tenor of metaphoric structure.

In the terms that I’ve set up for my argument, the poem insists that description itself will animate. In this formulation, “grace”’s directional aim toward the pangolin is met with the defenses of an “armored animal,” defending itself against description. The pangolin doesn’t speak in this poem, but it works back on “grace” such that “grace”’s presence in the poem cannot remain staid; both reliant on and resistant to its own description, the pangolin insists that its description both remain within the poem and consistently be reformulated. This is the play of

Moore's re-imagined chiasmic structure. Within space of the poem, it is not the figure of voice that renders a speaker mute or dead, but the object's simultaneous reliance on and resistance to description that changes the descriptive voice itself; ultimately, this reliance and resistance renders it impossible. "The Pangolin" as a lyric here follows Derrida's logic of the host: to calculate the risks at the same time that it refuses to close the door. Like the guest with baggage, the descriptive word's latent contents cannot be seen until it has already been welcomed inside. With "grace," the poem makes "use" of a presence that is not altogether known by asking it to voice the variations that make up its syntactical history and future. The pangolin does not itself speak, but it makes description speak as the pangolin's strangeness requires, morphing from one moment to the next.

If description may traditionally be considered to accord an object its object status, it affiliates well with armored animals, the part of the form hardened, resistant to manipulation, that which prevents against the nonsensical. Like the snail with its home on its back, Moore's "armored" animals are endowed with their own mobile castles—their bodies themselves fortifications against the outside world. I have suggested that description is animated by the poem until it is rendered impossible, a moment that aligns with various syntactical and generic overturnings of the poem. Such a moment occurs when the poem shifts from contemplating the pangolin to contemplating grace:

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

versities. To explain grace requires
a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
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...(119).

The latent “uses” of grace are made explicit when the poem reaches its generic and descriptive limits. When it shifts from the pangolin to contemplate grace, the lines continue to repeat variations on the word: these “confusions” of “grace” function in contrast to how we expect descriptive language to behave; here, one is never sure when the language will turn from serving something outside to serving itself. The re-positioning of words conserve their forms such that “that which is at all” is confused with “that which is forever.”

If the lyric gives voice to the voiceless as Riffaterre and De Man would have it, and that voice itself renders the poem’s speaker a monument, these lines attest to different formulation of animation. Here, the pangolin, the “form and frictionless creep of a thing / made graceful by adversities, con- / versities” returns in the form of those animals that “graced the spires” of the monk’s “ingenious” work, the unnamed cathedral. The pangolin is all at once multiplied, generalized into “animals” and turned to stone. It also becomes, like an adjective, that which

adorns, or “graces.” Having never spoken to begin with, the pangolin may not be said to have been “struck dumb,” and yet at the same time, it has been rendered un-describable. This turn to stone is not accompanied by the loss of voice, but instead by the loss of the pangolin’s status as the (central) object of description. Significant for my argument, then, is that as description reveals its own positional contingency, it reaches a point of impossibility in which its object ceases to be an object, but is conserved in a new form. This process also seems to insure the pangolin’s eventual return to the poem.¹

Thus far, I have suggested that a “host” in this poem may be identified with the object that invites in descriptive words whose contingency leads to a chiasmic reversal. And yet, iterations of the hospitality relationship may be identified in terms of generic types as well. The poem suggests that words carry with them latent generic remnants as well as syntactic positions. In fact, the syntactic pliability the poem celebrates allows words to produce their own ousting from a given generic context; “graceful” in these lines shifts the poem from a natural history text describing an anteater to speculations on divinity. These shifts seem to take place through what might be thought of as microcosmic speech acts: within the house of “The Pangolin,” the utterance of a word seems to call forth its latent contexts. For Moore, there is no object whose description will not also be an injunction to “explain” the words that object has invited in. The strangeness of Moore’s objects call for these words to multiply outward into other contexts, histories, and forms. Generic distinction is marked by the mobilization of these latencies.

The shift from the fifth to the sixth stanza, cited above, moves the poem from what I’ve been calling a natural history text genre to what appears as a philosophical proposition. The

¹ This return is rendered through another syntactical reversal. The adjective “machine-like,” initially invoked to describe the pangolin, returns as a noun in the line, “A sailboat / was the first machine.” The very utterance of machine seems to resurrect the pangolin, as the poem remembers the previous association it made. The line continues: “Pangolins, made / for moving quietly also, are models of exactness” (119).

pangolin itself figures for the boundary between internal and external, boasting a “grit-equipped gizzard” that allows it to ingest foreign elements such that “simpletons thought [it] a living fable / whom the stones had nourished whereas ants had done / so” (118).² How are genres digested by the poem? As readers, we may receive these lines as warning that genres which enter the body of the poem do not necessarily function the way we may predict. The simpleton sees the stones go into the body but tracks its passage incorrectly. The shift in literary modes is accomplished with a hybrid word itself—“con- / versities.” Straddling the stanzas in a kind of hyper-enjambment, the word suggests both the space between generic utterances and their mutual subjection to the ghost of Moore’s syllabic law³—a law only enacted in poetic contexts. That the syllabic is preserved at the moment of generic exchange perhaps suggests the sustained position of the poetic as host. As we may have expected, the monstrous reproduction is accomplished in part through sound rather than sense: “Adversities / con- / versities” enacts the “form and frictionless creep”; that is, the poem makes a hybrid word in part to create a frictionless sound—the repetition of the ending “versities.” The split of “con- / versities” functions as a threshold through which a new form may pass.

“Conversities” may also be read as a variation on the word “converse.” As a kind of proposition, “converse” calls us back to the word “prop,” one of the “uses” of the pangolin tail. I’d like here to connect back to Riffaterre’s interest in the “suppositive” as the mode that marks lyric forms and of which prosopopeia is an example. If prosopopeia gives a voice to the voiceless by mere convention, here “conversities” welcomes in a latent genre, enacting the same kind of

² We may notice in these lines as well that the possibility of a “living fable” would likely include animals that could speak, another indication that we may read the pangolin’s not speaking as nonetheless retaining the possibility—or perhaps the form—of voice.

³ Margaret Holley suggests that in Moore’s revisions, the remnants of her syllabic system “occasionally...show like bones through the contours of the free verse” (47), a formulation which calls attention to the persistent presence of a latent formal interior.

artifice and subject / object reversal that is enacted with figures of voice. Ultimately, the shape of the poem will take on a chiasmic form in which tenor and vehicle displace one another: originally the pangolin is described as having “certain postures of a man” (119), whereas eventually, the man is described as “in fighting, mechanicked / like the pangolin; capsizing in disheartenment” (119). If man is the “writing - / master” he nonetheless cannot write the pangolin without the pangolin writing him as well: in the end the man is described: “Consistent with the / formula: warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that / is mammal. There he sits in his own habitat” (120). The overturning of these grammatical positions within the poem suggest as well the way the position of the writer is overturned by one without a voice. Nonetheless, the pangolin who never speaks, redirects the description which both gives him existence and renders him written by another.

The hospitality relationship is fitting to consider in the context of a creature for whom the potential intrusion of another allows him to be figured the way he is. The pangolin is described as “unhurt,” “unintruded,” “not aggressive,” words that describe it in relationship to its recoiling from another’s presence. “The Pangolin” argues that words exist for the sake of a relationship, within a grammatical hierarchy and a contingent generic context. If grammatical laws presuppose asymmetrical relationships, so too does the law of hospitality. If, in one sense, Moore’s hard-shelled animals have been read as inhospitable to the outside world, their relationship to many discursive utterances suggests hospitality in its purest form: the willful consent to take in the other knowing that ultimately, one’s status may be displaced. Armored animals are also endowed with the unique potential to “capsize”; as such, they enact the purest form of hospitality, underbellies exposed, roofs and floors turned upside down. This is the problem enacted at the level of the word in any generic utterance: the word “grace” within the

context of natural history displaces the generic utterance itself, such that the un-uttered contexts or states of grace usurp the place of host. The word “grace” is not within quotation marks in the poem and therefore not marked as originating from the outside, but its operations suggest that entrances and thresholds exist in several iterations in the poem. In my reading, the outside presence marked by citation and allusion calls attention to the way that every word carries with it its own baggage, its own outside presence within it; as such, a logic of intertextuality extends through every part of the poem. In this sense, the outside that one knows is always in tension with the outside that has yet to be.

III. Bad Hosting

“Pure hospitality consists in welcoming whoever arrives before imposing any conditions on him, before knowing and asking anything at all, be it a name or an identity ‘paper’.... [it] consists in doing everything to address the other, to accord him, even to ask him his name, while keeping this question from becoming a ‘condition,’ a police inquisition, a blacklist, or simply border control.” –Derrida

**“He can talk but insolently says nothing. What of it?
When one is frank, one’s very presence is a compliment” –Moore, “Peter”**

Moore’s “animile” poems make up a sort of subgenre of Moore’s other lyrics. The animiles both serve to introduce a relatively unknown creature to the reader and to celebrate the creature’s unique qualities. As poems of praise, these approach the genre of ode, and yet, figures of apostrophe and prosopopeia are rarely foregrounded and most often absent altogether. At once filled with bits of natural history, facts, and legend, these poems are also marked by metaphoric leaps that seem to bypass realistic portrayal altogether, enacting the ethic represented by Moore’s famous line, “What is more precise than precision? Illusion” (151). Most significant for my argument, Moore’s animals in these poems refuse to be mere objects in an object world. Without *occupying* speaking positions, these figures nonetheless *direct* speaking positions available

within the poem.⁴ They figure a space of animation that the lyric accords the descriptive at the threshold of the poem. Like the cat in Moore's "Peter," Moore's poems are marked by a formal possibility to invoke the figure of voice even as they refrain from doing so. This possibility—of an animal who "can talk" but "says nothing"—creates conditions of animation that take on surprising valences, repetitions, and contingent forms; in this sense, silence directs voice as much as voices do.

Moore's penchant for welcoming otherness—strange animals or strange text—often positions her as guide or host for the reader. We might even say this expectation is intrinsic to the subgenre of "animile." Such expectation is perhaps what led John Ashbery to figure Moore's aesthetic in terms of "parting company": "I become aware before the end of a poem that Miss Moore and I have parted company somewhat further back. Sometimes, as in 'The Jerboa' the author has her say and retires, leaving you in the company of some curious little rodent" (Vincent 90). Ashbery thus figures Moore as a kind of bad host; his response to the poem suggests that even without an "I," Moore's voice can be felt to move closer and further away from the reader. Moore secures the company of Ashbery and jerboa, afforded because Moore's "say" is no longer heard. Although the jerboa does not speak, "presence" is redefined through a shift of voices. In my reading, Moore's bad hosting opens a space for animating the unexpected—the things the guest does when the host has gone to bed, accommodating herself in a way she could not with the host in the room. The next poem I will look at asks how to address the guest such that the questioning itself does not turn into a condition. "The Frigate Pelican"

⁴ As I hope is clear, my argument includes the assumption that Moore consistently frustrates attempts to read lyric as dramatic monologue alone in which the "I" is a fully formed subject speaking. In this way, my readings contrast with Holley's definition of lyric as she details the extent to which we might think of Moore as "lyrical": "the lyric as a genre is usually identified with the sense of a single speaker, a self that is the imagined source or medium of the poem's intended message. That self is a kind of persona, a fictional character created by the discourse, and to the extent that a poem yields this sense of a person speaking to us, we may say that it enters the lyric mode" (115). The lyric "I" cannot be equated with fictional character or personhood because it is precisely lyric's mode that renders it a trope, an artificial convention, frequently bypassing the idea of personhood altogether.

explores many of the same problems as “The Pangolin,” particularly in the way it frustrates the expectations of what description should be. Eventually, however, unlike “The Pangolin,” this poem will present the possibility of animals speaking, foregrounding the problem of voice explicitly and asking the reader to consider the operation of description morphs in the presence of prosopopeia.

“The Frigate Pelican” like “The Pangolin” is another “animile.” This poem too begins with what appears to be a description of the animal only to frustrate the expectations of what description should be. The poem immediately foregrounds the problem of description in its opening line: “Rapidly cruising or lying on the air there is a bird” (25). As in “The Pangolin,” here the description seems to revise itself, and yet, it is unclear whether this revision describes a change in the object world or a change in the position of the speaker. The first possibility suggests that the object world shifts—the pelican “rapidly cruises” in one moment of time and “lies on the air” in another; the second suggests that the description itself is shifting. In the latter reading, the image revises itself in what could be an endless pursuit of the accurate rendering of an object-world. Here, the bird is not changing, but the language misses its mark the first time, and persists forward with a second option (“or lies on the air”) to make itself more closely constitute the object it describes. Does the description of the bird foreground its own accuracy (offset by the pelican's flightiness), or its *inaccuracy* (offset by the pelican's stability)? In just the first line, the poem seems unclear what kind of movement it will track: the shifting of the object world—in which case the descriptive mode would “actualize a system of signs”—or the shifting of description itself—in which case, every utterance would arrive announcing its own contingency, and at the same time calling attention to the presence of a speaker, or one doing the

revising. The poem's object of meditation itself is thus undecidable; will the poem explore the bird itself or how to speak description? The poem eventually meets the impossibility of doing one without other with the possibility of the pelican itself speaking.

The ostensible object of meditation in the poem—the frigate bird—is associated with thievery insofar as it both steals from others to feed itself and collects stray objects which he then puts to creative use. The way Moore makes use of language from elsewhere—allusions and citations—suggests that the bird figures for her allusive aesthetic; the bird's behavior reflects the way the poem is put together. The enjambment of the first stanza takes on an ethical quality when the bird is called “unconfiding”; for Moore, the suspension of grammar that enjambment literalizes can be read as a resistance to “confiding.” In the beginning of the poem, the bird “realizes Rassela's friend's project / of wings uniting levity with strength,” in a line that alludes to Samuel Johnson. The words “wings uniting levity with strength” are a direct quote from Johnson's novel although they are not marked as such in the poem. Here, an outside voice poses as mere description; immediately, description enters the poem as stolen goods. As a thief, then, Moore puts the stolen object on display, calling attention both to what has been acquired and the lost original context of her verbal objects. In Susan Stewart's understanding of the “pickpocket” as a figure for allusion, she suggests that the scene of pickpocketing is an “event that slips out of its frame, leaving only an absence, and empty pocket, as its trace” (1128). Likewise, allusions are fragments “slipped” from their original frame, traces of absent original contexts. The allusion constructs literary tradition insofar as it is literally a selection of a past text through which the primary text is in part to be understood. Because allusion presents the possibility of tradition as well as the mark of absence, it is “simultaneously a revelation and a concealment by which tradition is manufactured” (1128).

Allusion as theft mobilizes a structure of revelation and concealment, a condition that gives meaning to Moore's depiction of the pelican as "the unconfiding frigate-bird [that] hides / in the height and in the majestic / display of his art" (26); in refusing to mark her citations, she confuses her sources with her "own words." In the case in which the stolen good is also description, it at once poses as the key to knowing both the object of the poem and another absent context. And yet, the poem critiques a system which would value the secrets that itself has positioned as the privileged unknown. Instead, it proposes "unconfiding" as a value in itself, a value that refuses the terms of address that would position one voice responding to another, one animated directly by the other. The poem instead celebrates spontaneous shifts in direction and voices emerging from unexpected places. Early in the poem, the frigate bird is contrasted with the predictability of domestic animals. He is

unlike the more stalwart swan that can ferry the
woodcutter's two children home. Make hay; keep
the shop. I have one sheep; were a less
limber animal's mottoes. This one
finds sticks for the swan's-down-dress
of his child to rest upon and would
not know Gretel from Hansel. (23)

The allusion to the end of a Grimm Brother's fairy tale in the middle of the poem's own progression argues the poem's distance from such a story: the swan serves as a convention of the fairytale plot, and as such allows for the tale to end. One effect of the allusion is to distinguish the frigate bird also from other animals as speakers. "Make hay; / keep the shop. I have one sheep" are not established as voices until after their utterance; knowledge of their origin is

delayed until we read “were a less limber animal’s mottoes” and we can recognize them as other than the descriptive voice of the poem. As with the pangolin, which was proclaimed *not* “a living fable” (118), here, too, the frigate bird is defined against the speaking animals of fairytale forms. And yet, in both cases, the distinguishing characteristics of Moore’s animals leave unclear what exactly their relationship is to voice; their very contrast with “living fables” suggest that Moore’s animals also have qualities of animation beyond the facts of natural history. The simple mandates of the other animals take on the status of clichés, moving in one direction like the ferrying swan, without obstructing the forward movement of grammar. The pelican, whose movements are described above these lines in enjambment, embodies a kind of agile movement that seems to defy the descriptive register that would contain it. The allusion to the swan as an agent of narrative closure—ferrying children home—and one who knows the children’s names, suggests a kind of allusive aesthetic that would also construct a narrative of literary history. Identified with safety of home rather than the dangers of inhospitality in the witch’s house, the swan also figures for the safety known, finished narratives.

But the swan is picked up by the poem a few lines down; once associated with the one-directional, with safety, “home,” and endings, the swan reemerges as a possessive adjective to describe—oddly enough—the pelican’s own child: “the swan’s-down’s dress of [the pelican’s] child.” If *these* children are made of “swan’s-down-dress,” then the figure of the swan has been reclaimed for the body of the baby bird, displaced to a site within the pelican’s own domestic abode. Reduced to synecdoche (“swan” is no longer the animal, but the baby frigate bird’s outer covering), the swan likewise turns from noun to adjective, grammatically in the service of adorning, but not of naming. The swan, who once knew names, no longer functions as a name, what in Derrida’s terms would express “knowledge of the visitor.” Reclaimed as a descriptor, the

swan that entered as a figure for ending itself is un-ended in its participation as descriptor of the pelican's child. It also transforms from that which moves laterally—ferrying—to that which exists in simultaneity; the difference is between its placement as the subject of a complete clause—serving a discursive function—as a component of the “swan's-down-dress—serving a paratactic function. That which entered the poem seeming to manufacture literary tradition, itself is displaced to description, to a nearly “hidden” site. And yet, the allusion for Moore has animated her description, suggesting that allusion itself moves and changes when it enters into an unknown abode.

The poem shifts its mode completely from a description of the frigate-bird with an ellipses and words that seem to represent the pelican's own “motto”:

Festina lente. Be gay

civilly? How so? ‘If I do well I am blessed

whether any bless me or not, and if I do

ill I am cursed.’ (26).

Abruptly, the reader is positioned as overhearing an odd conversation in which neither speaker seems to be responding to the other. In fact, we do not recognize this as a conversation until we read the questions, “Be gay, civilly? How so?” which suddenly calls attention to the place of voice on the poem. These questions suggest that the words “*festina lente*” indicate a separate voice, and for the first time we hear (in the questions) what seems to be the original voice of the poem *as voice* rather than description. Literally, the origin of the words “*festina*

lente” is the motto of the fifteenth century publisher Aldus Pius Manutius, whose legacy included the invention of italic type, which of course is enacted in these very words. In this case, the interrupting voice actually seems to constitute what came before it *as voice*; with no “I,” and marked by description, the poem prior to the words “*festina lente*” did not call attention to voice. This interruption is also concurrent with the arrival of a verbal object from elsewhere. If the condition of production for this conversation is interruption, Moore redirects the reader’s attention again when she translates *festina lente* as “be gay, civilly?” As a mistranslation, these words subordinate meaning to translation’s inevitable misdirection, all of which coincides with the emergence of two speakers. The enjambment that opened the poem is reflected again in a conversation whose condition seems to be directional reversals. This conversation ultimately is not interrupted so much as it is impelled or compelled by non-address, by response that comes from afar, or outside the contract under which the conversation seems to have begun.

In fact, the mistranslation reproduces a formal match to the absent, conventional translation. “*Festina lente*” generally translates as “make haste, slowly.” Moore’s mistranslation, “Be gay, civilly,” matches “Make haste slowly” in syllabic length, rhythm, and grammatical form. By responding in such a way that the form of the utterance is matched while its meaning goes unaddressed, the voice calls attention to the distinction of types of verbal utterance at the moment the poem shifts from a descriptive to a lyric register. Here, we are met directly with the possibility of the pelican speaking; these words foreground prosopopeia, one of the most obvious conventions of lyric, and yet, the possibility remains that these words emerge from a disembodied source. As in “Peter,” this the poem leaves open the possibility that the frigate bird *can* talk. And yet, if he does, he offers no explanation for these words; he does not speak in order to tell his own story or display his own agency. And yet, this very lack of understanding sends

the poem—and the listeners in the pelican’s company—in a new direction altogether, into a maze of questions posing as responses, missing their marks completely. By calling attention to the type of verbal utterance spoken, more than the identity of a speaker, Moore comments on the structure of what I have called a confiding ethic: a system that values revealing the secrets that itself has positioned as the privileged unknown. Moore, who disavowed literary precursors, here refuses to identify the site from where one speaks, but instead follows the contours of disembodied words as they shift and change their trajectories. .

III. Silent Residences

While the “animiles” discussed in the previous pages show the relationship between the entrance of descriptive modes and animation, in Moore’s poem “Silence,” description is nearly absent completely. In this poem, voices from outside themselves function like guests, arriving with the same potential to displace or overturn that we have seen with the descriptive mode. If the poem may be said to exhibit the descriptive mode at all, it is in the context of an extended metaphor in which the speaker likens “superior people” to a “self-reliant” cat. An image of a solitary animal, fastidiously attending to its own needs, the cat may be considered an instance of Moore’s subgenre “animile,” here appearing in a diminutive form. As a vehicle to the metaphoric structure, the cat that “takes its prey to privacy” in a sense lodges within another kind of poem altogether. While this poem has been read in terms of Moore’s relationship to literary history—insofar as she gives hearing to a male tradition in order to undermine it—the cat itself seems to testify to the way Moore’s own aesthetic can be relocated within the words of others. If “self-

reliant like the cat” has been read as an allusion to an Emersonian literary history,⁵ the animile as –an idiosyncratic form of Moore’s own invention—finds “privacy” within it. As much as Moore seems to be inviting in voices of literary history here, she also may be said to be referencing the originality of her own oeuvre.

And yet, it is this very idea of “one’s own” that this poem will problematize. In my reading, “Silence” thematizes the trope of hospitality that is enacted at a formal level in nearly all of Moore’s poetry. The last line of the poem, “Inns are not residences,” declares an opposition which calls attention to the limits of reception by suggesting that an “inn” will never serve as a permanent home. I read the invocation of “inns” and “residences” as alternate ways of understanding a relationship to words themselves: do words ever achieve the status as “one’s own” or do they function as lodgers, perpetually unattached to any site of original utterance? As I have been arguing, Moore perpetually frustrates the process of locating the sites of speaking positions; in fact, their very contingency serves as a source of animation itself. In welcoming other voices into her poem, Moore in some ways positions herself as “host”; in leaving the last word to herself, she also doesn’t allow the house of the poem to be overrun by the words of others. Most of “Silence” consists of words quoted by the speaker’s “father,” who expounds on the habits of “superior people,” including how they visit and speak. In the last two lines of the poem, referring to the father, the speaker says, “Nor was he insincere in saying, ‘Make my house your inn.’ / Inns are not residences” (91). In declaring what inns are not, Moore calls attention to the limits of the hospitality relationship as it is expressed in the father’s offer. In particular, the last line suggests that hospitality exists simultaneously with its exclusions; here, what the poem invites in and excludes are mutually constitutive. “Residences” suggests the possibility of

⁵ Elizabeth Gregory’s chapter on Moore in *Quotation in Modernist Poetry* exemplifies this argument in an extended, eloquent reading of “Silence.”

ownership, especially since the father has declared that “superior people” “can be robbed of speech / by speech which has delighted them” (91). The idea of “robbing” speech and guarding against the possibility of losing one’s residence, suggest the father’s understanding that both words and houses are things to be possessed, and therefore things that also may be seized. If “Silence” ends by declaring that “inns are not residences,” this declaration is also enacted in its form: Moore invites in the speech of others—a woman named Mrs. A.M. Homans and Edmund Burke—in creating the voice of the father. To some extent Moore repeats the injunction of the father to “make my house your inn” by lending space to these voices without risking her own loss of self-possession; she preserves the last line for herself. Moore even outdoes the father’s voice by positioning it in such a way that the space it occupies undoes the meaning it expresses. Moore ironizes the father’s speech by giving him the line that “superior people” can be “robbed of speech” even as his speech takes up all but three lines of the poem.

This displacement of voices is accomplished at another level, however, for the language the quotation marks enclose correspond to some extent—but not exactly—to the language Moore has acquired from “outside.” Susan Stewart has noted that, within quotation marks, “we see the articulation of a boundary that defines not just the text of the quotation but the supposed discourse of originality that surrounds it” (1134). I have read Moore as a cautious host, refusing to allow her house to be overrun by preserving the last line for herself, a gesture that appears to create a “discourse of originality.” And yet, when we consult Moore’s notes, we discover that in some cases, her “own words” are within quotation marks and the words of others are outside quotation marks, suggesting that breakdown of ownership altogether. The roles of guest and host are foregrounded only to be elided; the voice of the other which at first appeared to displace the voice of the poet shows itself to be confused with the “discourse of originality” and therefore

undoes the way we must consider “originality” itself. Moore thus demonstrates that the way a concept of language from elsewhere, from another, depends on an idea of authorial originality; if we recognize what is within her quotations as another’s speech, we also recognize that which is outside of quotations as her “own.” It is this very expectation that she subverts in her notes’ explanations of the words’ origins. What the father has “said” was in fact, partly Mrs. A.M Homans, partly Edmund Burke, and partly Moore herself; as much as Moore invites others’ voices into her poems, the father’s voice is thus not his own either. And yet, the poem read alongside its notes asks the reader to participate in this process of asking whose is whose, of assigning language to an identity and then undoing the certainty of that assignation.

This displacement of voices, however, is complicated by the very way Moore understands the relationship between guest and host; while an “outside” voice enters the poem, it both instantiates the boundary between inside and outside, and also troubles this boundary at the same time. Readings of “Silence” tend to be limited by the tendency to read dramatic monologue as the dominant, organizing trope of the poem. In my reading, the dramatic monologue, as a figure that actualizes the identity of a speaker as well as the site from which he speaks, is undone by the very way words animate themselves. As in “The Pangolin,” the lyric form ousts words themselves from their present positions, giving them lodging, but not “residence.” In this way, our tendency to read the poem as the “father’s” words—or Moore responding back to the father—is complicated by the way she foregrounds the intrinsic impermanence of any speaking position. Like Moore’s animals who resist their own description through their potential to speak, rather than speech itself, here too animation is borne through silence’s potential to out itself. The image of the cat that I have read as a diminutive “animile” is perhaps a more likely candidate for “originality,” the moment in the poem that foregrounds an idiosyncratic form more than the

contents of a fictionalized voice speaking. Insofar as the is a figure for form itself—Moore’s animile, silent but also asserting itself as a form repeated in multiple iterations—it suggests the value of spatial contours as much as verbal content.

Most significantly for this poem, the silence of clichéd language morphs language into something new. The speaker outside of the quotation marks, often identified with Moore herself, or the female poet, actually responds to what is *not* said by father-speaker. In yet another displacement, Moore quotes Burke word for word in an injunction that can be read as a revision of the cliché, “make my home your home.” Instead, in Burke’s words, “make my home your inn,” “inn” displaces “home,” a displacement “silences” the word we would have expected. In selecting out this revised cliché, Moore chooses to repeat exactly that which is *not* repeated *ad infinitum*, but something very close. What is worth repeating, therefore, is that which is near to what is always repeated; in fact, it is its closeness which makes it, literally remarkable. Moore calls attention to the way that singularity may be borne more from selected repetition than using “one’s own” words. “Make my home your home” never originates in the mouth of the one who speaks it, whereas “make my house your inn” preserves some quality of originality, even as, in Moore’s reiteration, it is marked as being from the voice of another.

The displacement of “home” for “inn” replicates the process Moore has enacted in her quotations; she has marked language as belonging to a subject only to refuse the possibility of permanent belonging, placed language securely within a structure of ownership only to disavow that structure. When Burke’s line appears, the word that seems to be most his “own,” the word that marks the difference from cliché, is “inn,” which is of course followed by the final line, “Inns are not residences.” And yet, by this point in the poem, the letters “i-n-s” have already been inscribed three times: “The deepest feeling shows itself **in** silence; not **in** silence, but

restraint. / Nor was he **insincere**...” (91). The word “inns,” which seems to have been generated by Burke’s remark, was actually inside the poem the entire time. When the last two lines draw our attention back to these instances of letters, we can see how the same letters lodge themselves in ways that not only undo their meaning, but also their very ability to make themselves audible. And yet, their visual assertion—the fact that we can distinguish i-n-s with our eyes without necessarily hearing its sameness across different words—suggests the way words lodge in silence. Literally, “ins” lodges twice “**in** silence.” The poem here seems to de-privilege the content of outside voices and relocate the space of silence that these very voices animate. That the last few lines of the poem revise one another—“shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint” and “make my house your inn. / Inns are not residences”—suggests again the way that words lodge rather than reside, constantly moving on to new positions. And “inns” occur in the least likely contexts; in a word like *insincere* we find “inns,” suggesting that this word cannot help but declare its function as accommodation at the same time its meaning declares disingenuous or deceitful.

Silence suggests not only the absence of speech, but also the anticipation of speech as the space between words. If “ins” does indeed lodge in silence, it is likened to Moore’s own rhyme patterning. Like the “ins” that remain hidden until we go searching for them, Moore’s rhymes are heard “on the page” rather than “on the ear.” Their unstressed lines do not make rhyme readily obvious, and their but the reader persists in *seeing* rhyme as well as hearing rhyme in unlikely places. “Silence” makes a near rhyme with “residences,” but it is not nearly as aurally detectable as it is visually. In the closeness between “silence” and “residences,” Moore thus marks a boundary between what may be heard aloud and what may be heard only in silence. Again what may be heard in silence gestures toward the lyric mode—toward those sites or spaces that may

speak at any moment, whose potential to speak shifts the contours of the speech all around them. If “silence” is likened to “residence,” however, it is the one concept in the poem perhaps closest to ownership, the most permanent site through which to trace animation’s trajectories.

Although “Silence” makes use of bits of speech rather than description from a natural history textbook, it thematizes the limits of hospitality which nonetheless is dependant on discursive inclusiveness to be brought into existence. For Moore, the potential to be displaced is a necessary risk in understanding one’s native strangeness. The hospitality relationship helps figure a convention that structures one’s availability to the unknown. Lyric’s potential to speak itself creates the contours by which its guests’ voices speak, changing them and itself in the process.

Works Cited

- Culler, Jonathan. "Comparing Poetry: 2001 ACLA Presidential Address." *Comparative Literature* 53.3. Summer 2001: vii-xviii.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Law of Genre" in Derek Attridge ed., *Acts of Literature*. Routledge: New York and London, 1992.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law." *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*. 1998: 549-575.
- Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Riffaterre, Michael. "Prosopopeia." *Yale French Studies, No 69: The Lesson of Paul De Man*. 1985: 107-123.
- Stewart, Susan. "The Pickpocket: A Study in Tradition and Allusion." *MLN, Vol 95, No 5*. December 1980: 1127-1154.