Marianne Moore and a Psychoanalytic Paradigm for the Dissociated Image

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A hallmark of modernist poetry is the dissociated image—the evening sky once Eliot has compared it to a patient etherized on a table—as opposed to images with more conventional shared relations of time, or place, or logical type. The modernist basis for the reader's intuitive perception of similarity-in-difference, to use Aristotle's criterion for a good metaphor, is a likeness typically limited to psychological and cultural connotations. Given this focus on psycho-cultural meaning, critics should consider carefully the psychoanalytic history of dissociated images in a poetic canon, if only to understand better in modernist poetry the complex crucial relation between autobiography and cultural criticism. By explaining the key stylistic developments of dissociation as a defense mechanism in a modernist's canon, the psychoanalytic critic brings to light those underlying fantasies which are, for readers as well as for writers, both private and cultural.

Marianne Moore chose almost to specialize in the juxtaposition of unrelated naturalistic surfaces, often to picture vividly in the mind's eye one close-up detail: the fronds above a cat's eye, for example, as compared in "Peter" with katydid legs. Moore's concern for surface description fractured by such dissociated images, cut her speaker's ego off from an outside world of characters. Consequently, this ego also would not address directly past literary personalities. Whereas Ezra Pound created Personae, T. S. Eliot "Police in Different Voices," and William Carlos Williams The Tempers, Moore restricted herself mostly to diffuse observations of natural objects and scenes. In tableaux of dissociated phrases, like "An Octopus" or "The Steeple-Jack," the speaker's ego remained subsidiary to externalities, frustrating thematic critics in search of symbolic material; as the speaker observes mid-way through "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance is Good," she relies on a "feigned inconsequence of manner" or "self-protectiveness," with frequent images of armor, of scales, and of shells. In contrast, Moore's early poetry of the 1910's is not only more uneven work, but often, as in "Radicals," more openly emotional and blatantly political. We can trace this key shift to a "feigned inconsequence of manner" with its controlled dissociated images by comparing the unpublished "A Tiger" with its later published version—"Peter" (1924). A psychoanalytic comparison of the two poems will show Moore developing and securing her particular paradigm for the modernist dissociated image, while her speaker establishes a distinctly new relation to the animal subject as a significant Other. This psychological shift in the poem's central dramatic relationship provides for a comparable shift in the speaker's relation to her readers: both cat and readers may be tolerated as separate, free, and potentially aggressive.

The earlier version of "Peter" summarizes stoic isolation and repressive passivity in the projection of an inherently aggressive animal. "A Tiger" is a calculated confrontation of self-protectiveness as a strategy for survival. Moore's speaker describes a caged tiger that, she twice mentions, accepts his condition only with scorn and yet refuses to pace or otherwise disturb his cage. That is, he projects his own refusal to complain onto the cage, a defense which leaves him no course of action and feeling empty inside. Likewise, his breathing seems to no purpose as well as being his only semantic sign or expressive feature. In contrast, the other animals pace about. But the differences thereafter are deceptive: though the tiger's inaction would seem to contrast with four other animals that exemplify tense nerves, dry humor, kingly pride, and a false good will, they are in fact a splitting of his aim. The defense of splitting, according to Norman Holland, is dividing "the aim or object of a drive into two or more aims or objects" as, for example, when the tiger resembles several other caged animals. It may seem odd at first that the other animals express the tiger's own psychological traits. But that which he scorps most, he in a sense admires. This disguised splitting allows the tiger to perceive himself as visibly unininvolved like a scientist or anyone who makes accurate observations. Again there is a key qualification: the tiger's specific yet conceptualized expression is actually one of kingly condescension, with no compassion for anything lower than himself. His markings, which resemble a
harmless type of self-protection, are actually the aggressive armor of self-protectiveness; and the apparently passive claws are essentially never tamed.

Though Moore's speaker would retain a scientific distance in her tone, there remains an underlying ironic scorn. The inspection of this satire helps account for the poem's confusing tenuousness in point of view: only in context is it apparent that in the line where splitting occurs we are actually getting the tiger's judgment of others in comparison to himself. One way for Moore's speaker to resolve anxiety is to downplay the aggressiveness of earlier satire, since the more she attacks aggressive self-protectiveness in others (“Radical,” “Those Various Sculpels,” “New York”) the more she seems in fact to like it. Extreme vivid satire suggests the defense mechanism of a reaction-formation: the ego turns the aim of a drive into its opposite. Part of the calmer affect of “A Tiger” is due to a new poetic defense which occurs after the splitting of animals into other cages: the radically dissociated comparisons with a lizard, a toadstool, and a butterfly. These likenesses are further examples of splitting, though they also suggest a degree of introjection: “Mentally taking an object into one's mind, often with the fantasy that it has been physically incorporated through eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or skin.” Although the fantasy of total introjection or identification is lacking here, let us call these radical comparisons “introjected splitting”—introjected because partially internalized, and splitting because the objects split the aim to appear scientific. Moreover, our experience of the contextual affect overcomes the possible theoretical contradiction (internal/external) of introjected splitting; that is, we consciously experience the externality typical of splitting, almost forgetting about the tiger's body as a whole; yet we also sense unconsciously the internalizing typical of introjection. This unusual poetic defense permits Moore's speaker to internalize the tiger, while at the same time allowing him, though in a cage, to be a significant other quite independent of her. Moore the poet eschews the more conventional naturalistic symbolism typical of her earlier work.

Moore's speaker capitalizes on introjected splitting in the poem "Peter," a revised version of "A Tiger," by using it much earlier in her presentation, which enables her to free the animal from its cage. The unifying dramatic action of "Peter" is essentially psychological—the speaker's realization that the cat, which she thought could be easily talked about and toyed with, has in the meantime awakened to assert his independent will. Once she catches her error ("I should have said might have been"), she quickly accepts Peter on his own terms, even his

unfriendly silence as he "insolently says nothing." She discovers that the animal is not just unpredictable but also inevitably aggressive. Her final acceptance of Peter's free nature depends on her acknowledging that his insolent silence and potential aggressiveness are both honest expressions of his will. Consequently, she can surrender "human" "hypocrisy," like the desire to manipulate him with her hands or her words, as if he had no identity of his own.

The speaker's reduction of anxiety—the caged tiger now a harmless independent house cat—depends on her verbal style. It is the saying of the poem, or "the published fact," which releases tension. Introjected splitting in "Peter" seems a more general but still radical dissociation of very conscious comparisons: "katydid legs," "shadbones set about the mouth," and "porcupine—quills." Our sense of unconscious introjection is weakened by the self-consciousness of the comparisons, just as our conscious sense of splitting is limited to the "porcupine quills," which we associate with the later "claws" as part of a generally aggressive drive. The dominant affect is almost entirely the reaction to superficial appearance, rather than a psychological strategy for defense. Moore's speaker muses over appearance for its own sake; her ego dissociates itself from symbolization and thereby faces an external reality. The speaker voices her satisfaction with this defense both in her humorous tone and in her willingness to play a "joke" on Peter—two forms of radical dissociation, as Freud has amply noted in his analysis of jokes. In fact, the strategy of dissociation is pervasive: in the radical images of comparison, in the speaker's final acceptance of the suddenly absent Peter, and in the speaker's closing separation of herself from her audience. She ends with aphoristic advice, a defense of undoing: to close a story with a wrapping up that cancels out as well. This "cancelling out" is explicit in the speaker's emphatic negations: "to do less would be nothing but dishonesty." Just as Moore's speaker has recovered her sense of "life" by symbolizing and then dismissing Peter's threat (which is "to abandon the wire nail"), so does she expect her readers not only to feel psychological danger, while trying to untangle her initial daydream about Peter, but also to dismiss him as an external ego which poses no immediate threat. Just as the speaker frees Peter, so do her readers break free from her and her initially confused description.

This speaker may have let the scornful tiger out of his self-protective cage, and her ego may have reached a world of merely external appearances, but she remains nonetheless isolated from her audience. As she observes in "Monkey Puzzle" (1925), not only does
one not "account for [an art work's] origin," a fact which restricts
philosophic certainty to appearances; but also, she says in a marginal
note, she would rather be lonely than not happy. The poem's radical
dissociation of metaphors achieves both the satisfied happiness of sub-
limation, and the loneliness of one isolated in material appearances.
"Old Tiger" (1932) summed up more precisely Moore's dilemma,
partly because she in fact wrote it in 1917 and then adapted from it
lines for "A Tiger," "Peter," and "Monkey Puzzle." This seminal poem
depicts Moore's new poetic stance as a barely satisfactory existence.
"You know one thing, an inkling of which has not entered their minds;
you know that it is not necessary to live in order to be alive." This
"half-human" position, of which readers are not conscious, stems from
description in which "the whole surface has become so polished as to
afford/ no little/ seam or irregularity at which to catch." The dilemma
for the descriptive speaker is that the only alternative seems to be
symbolic self-projection, as in painting: "Attempt to brush away the
Fool/dog and it is forsworn much more than a dog..." In the end, however,
the basic difficulty discussed in "Old Tiger" is not with artistic tech-
nique but with the artist's ego: "the will/ apparently having been made
part of the constitution until/ it has become subsidiary." Moore's poetry
remained limited mostly to naturalistic scenes and animals because her
speaker's ego remained subsidiary to external appearances. To avoid
symbolization is, finally, to isolate oneself from characterization and
audience. Moore's speaker strikes her readers as the absent as well as
significant Other.

Despite the lack of contact with an outside world of characters, this
speaker voiced a dominant fantasy of modernist poetry—the desire to
resolve one's relation to an absent yet significant Other: Eliot's es-
tranged women, Pound's heroes from past cultures, and Williams'
presences behind springtime. As a way to free the significant Other or
animal subject in her poems from manipulative symbolic projection,
Moore developed a particular stylistic strategy for the modernist dis-
sociated image—introjected splitting. With this new strategy, she taught
her readers freedom from anxious introjection. That is, she offered
precise surface accounts of exotic creatures, leaving their identities
independent of her poetic voice. The creatures seemed absent once

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1 My term dissociated image is a descriptive stylistic phrase and not to be
confused with Eliot's much debated use of dissociation of sensibility in his essay
"The Metaphysical Poets" (1921).