

Daniel Tiffany: On "The Fish"

All

external

marks of abuse are present on this

defiant edifice?

all the physical features of

ac-

cident?lack

of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and

hatchet strokes, these things stand

out on it; the chasm-side is

dead.

Repeated

evidence has proved that it can live

on what can not revive

its youth.

("The Fish" 32-33)

Two things about this passage (aside from its great beauty) are significant: first, the reader is deprived of any reference indicating that the phenomenon described so vividly and concretely is an animal, much less a fish. The virtuosity of Moore's observation decomposes the intuitive coherence of objects. Second, like Schrodinger's cat?though much more explicitly?the "defiant edifice," whose mesmerizing facade defies the reader's comprehension, swims in the element of adversity, thereby betraying a world of mortal danger: the animal is, to be more precise, a picture of "accident" and "abuse"?a ruin. Indeed, half of it is gone ("the chasm-side is dead"), though "it can live" on other living things. Again, like Schrodinger's cat, the creature in this traumatic (though somehow neutral) milieu is both dead and alive, "mixed or smeared out in equal parts."

Despite the wealth of visual and sensory evidence, Moore's poem does not represent a fish-object; instead, it depicts a "blurred reality," or complementary aspects of it, that resist integration into a coherent or determinate picture of physical reality. The ruined creature of Moore's virtuosity is poised between the visible and the invisible, a picture of ephemerality; yet it is also a cipher, a corporeal anagram combining social, imaginative, and material realities. In all of Moore's fables, however, the animal-cipher is born from the meticulous observations of the naturalist. . . .

From *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Copyright © by the Regents of the University of California.

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