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World

Kári Driscoll

In 1939, Gertrude Stein published a book for children entitled *The World Is Round*, about a girl named, inevitably, Rose, her dog Love, and her cousin Willie, who has a lion. Chapter eight, entitled "Rose Thinking," consists of a single sentence: "If the world is round would a lion fall off" (2013, 25). This enigmatic and seemingly whimsical thought raises many questions, but I will limit myself to the following: First, the absence of a question mark here, as elsewhere in the text, makes it ambiguous how the sentence is to be read, and this ambiguity also begins to trouble the constative nature of the book's title, enabling us to question whether the world is indeed round – whether this is not to conflate it with the planet earth, say. Relatedly, we might also question the use of the definite article; is there such a thing as "*the* world" (and if so, is it round?) and so forth. Second, this growing ambiguity is compounded by the abrupt shift from the indicative ("is") to the subjunctive ("would"). How are we to interpret this? And third, if there is such a thing as *the* world, and if it is in fact round, why would a lion in particular be in danger of falling off?

Let us begin with the lion. The title of the first chapter of *The World Is Round* invokes Stein's most famous phrase, "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" from her poem "Sacred Emily" (Stein 1922, 187). Like many poets of her generation, Stein felt that words had become worn out and lost their immediacy, so that now when you read or write a poem about roses, "you know in your bones that the rose is not *there*" (Stein 1947, vi). The formula, which Stein reused time and again, was an attempt to reassert the *thingness* of words, and hence to minimize the difference between word and world. Interestingly, while Rose is declared "a rose" and "would have been Rose" by any other name as well (Stein 2013, 1), her cousin Willie's identity is less secure, seemingly because of the lion. The lion, we read, has "a name as well as a mane and that name is Billie" (27). The similarity of the two names appears to invite confusion, and prompts Rose to wonder: "Is a lion not a lion" (21). If a lion is not a lion, would that mean that the lion is not *there*?

By a curious coincidence, shortly after Stein published her book, Ludwig Wittgenstein was also worrying about the proposition "Lion is a lion" and what it meant for the place of lions in the world. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – also a product of the crisis of language and representation, and published, incidentally, in 1922, the same year as Stein's "Sacred Emily" – he had defined the world as "everything that is the case," but in his notes from the year 1944, Wittgenstein was moved to revise his stance on the limits of the world, seemingly for the sake of the lion. According to the *Tractatus*, a statement could have sense only if it represented a state of affairs, i.e., something which is "the case." Thus any and all statements about fictional lions – the lion in the **fable** tradition, say – would be relegated to the realm of nonsense. The *Tractatus* demands that in order for something to be "the case," and hence "in the world," it must be possible to determine not only that it exists but that it does so in a definite number of instances as well. Consequently, the phrase "Lion is a lion" must be taken to be using the word "lion" in two different ways, namely as a name for an individual and as a species designation. But in fables we encounter *the* lion, not *a* lion, "nor yet a particular lion so-and-so," and thus "it actually is as if the species lion came to be seen as a lion" (Wittgenstein 1967, 182; Blumenberg 2010, 63–69). This leads to a contradiction, because it is impossible to determine whether "the Lion" refers to the species or an individual – or indeed whether it is the same lion each time. The criterion for existence in the world of the *Tractatus* was the avoidance of contradictions: it had to be possible to determine whether something is "the case" or not. Now, two decades later, Wittgenstein is no longer satisfied with such a definition. In reference to the formally nonsensical proposition "the class of lions is not a lion," he now asks, simply: "How do you know?" (1967, 182). Even though it "seems like nonsense," Wittgenstein argues that it can be read as a "proper sentence, if only it is taken right" (182), namely as a language-game involving a different kind of certainty than mathematical certainty (see Wittgenstein 1958, 224). For Wittgenstein, the ultimate aim of these ruminations is thus a reevaluation of the problem of certainty, and the lion's rescue is simply a felicitous by-product – but I would like to take this as an argument for literature as a means of extending "the world" beyond whatever happens or appears to be "the case."

How might we relate this to the questions of critique – especially of terrestrial critique, of the question of the planet, the world, the cosmos, and our place in it? The word "world" and its cognates (*Welt*, *wereld*, *veröld*) consists of the Germanic roots "wer" ("man"; as in "werewolf" and "virile") and "ald," and means, literally, "age of man." Thus, in a sense, the concept of the Anthropocene is already implicit in "world" – both in terms of its anthropocentrism and, more interestingly, the fact that it denotes a **temporality** rather than a locality. As critics of the term have pointed out, the term "Anthropocene" is nonsensical, etymologically speaking. Moreover, since "Holocene" means "wholly recent," "the decision to bring this epoch to an end would mark the present as a peculiar time, *after the recent*, a time out of time in more than one sense" (Luciano 2015). Time is not only out of joint; it is running out. The "world" would thus seem to name a series of disjunctures between incompatible conceptions of what is "the case": despite its anthropocentric denomination, this new "age of man" also marks a heightened awareness of our **entanglement** and codependence, of the fact that we share a terrestrial space with other creatures and other forms of life, each of which have their own *Umwelten* and hence their own worlds. "World" is thus both singular and plural: there is only one, and there is an infinite variety, each tied to a different mode of being-in-the-world, which is also simultaneously a form of being-with. Is it not the task of critique to interrogate the interstices of these two senses of "world" – as something that is simply *there* but simultaneously cannot simply be taken for granted, and as something, especially if we want to conceive of it as something we have *in common* with other forms of life on this planet, that we must actively work to produce?

Perhaps this might help us understand the abrupt shift from indicative to subjunctive in Rose's question. In his 1929–30 lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger notoriously posited that "the animal is poor in world," in contrast to man, who is "world-forming" (1995, 177). Thus, while man "has world" in the full sense, the animal has world only in a circumscribed capacity – and hence its mode of being-in-the-world is not a being-*there* (*Da-sein*). The difference, for Heidegger, lies in the notion that the animal does not have a relation to the world *as such* – the lion, say, sunning himself on the savannah, does not perceive the warmth of the sun *as such*. To which Wittgenstein might quite reasonably respond: "How do you know?" And, conversely, as Jacques Derrida puts it, how do you know that "man, the human itself, has the 'as such'" (2008, 160)? This apophantic "as"-structure grounds Heidegger's approach to the problem of world. But is there such a thing as "the world *as such*"? In his final seminar, Derrida opposed this indicative "as" with a subjunctive "as if": The unity and community of the world is "nowhere and never given in nature" (Derrida 2011, 9). In fact, "[t]here is no world, there are only islands" (9). And yet, we carry on "*as if* we were inhabiting the same world" (268), and this *as if* is an act of poetic creation. Thus, as Michael Naas summarises, it is "*as* *if* there were a performative *as if* lodged within all our constative assertions and reassuring statements about the world, a *comme si* at the heart of every claim that the world is *comme ça*" (Naas 2015, 58). In other words, the subjunctive precedes the indicative – the lion's hypothetical fall comes before whatever is "the case" [*der Fall*] – and every "world" is contingent upon the possibility of other worlds, even ones in which a lion would not fall off.

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