

## Peer Review

# Review of: "Being "More" Than the World: Rethinking Rand's "Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World""

Thomas Payre<sup>1,2</sup>

1. School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, United Kingdom; 2. Hérîtages : Culture/s, Patrimoine/s, Création/s (UMR 9022), Université de Cergy-Pontoise, France

This is a thoroughly thought-provoking and original essay that undertakes the ambitious project of reframing William Brighty Rands's 'Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World' through the existential ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre. The essay is both creative and courageous: creative in its conceptual cross-temporality, and courageous in tackling one of the most notoriously difficult philosophers of the 20th century. The outcome is a compelling re-reading that opens up unexpected philosophical dimensions in a poem traditionally read as innocent and childlike.

## Two Outstanding Contributions

### 1. Engaging with a Neglected Text in a Meaningful Way

One of the most valuable contributions of this paper is its commitment to reviving critical interest in a text that has been largely overlooked by scholarly communities. As the author rightly notes, despite Rands being recognised as 'the laureate of the nursery,' his lyric 'Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World' has rarely, if ever, received sustained critical analysis beyond its context in children's literature or nature poetry. As the paper states: 'regrettably, the absence of dedicated analyses has left this question unanswered. The present study seeks to fill that void.' The essay does this not by merely offering another thematic interpretation but by radically re-situating the poem within a philosophical framework that has, until now, had no known relation to Rands. This is not only bold but potentially generative for future literary criticism. The act of critically resurrecting an overlooked piece and situating it in a broader philosophical discourse lends the work immediate merit. It is not difficult to imagine this approach inspiring parallel readings of other 'minor' or neglected Victorian poets and nursery texts.

### 2. Deploying Sartrean Ontology as a Critical Method

The most intellectually exciting move in the paper is its appropriation of Sartre's Being and Nothingness as an interpretive tool for poetry analysis. Rather than using Sartre in a merely decorative or illustrative way, the author draws on his dualistic ontology – particularly the distinction between the 'in-itself' (en-soi) and the 'for-itself' (pour-soi) – to construct a metaphysical argument about the poem's speaker: 'the speaker's belief expressed in the conclusion, therefore, becomes the metaphor for his transcendence of the world on account of his conscious existence.' This use of Sartrean concepts to illuminate a poetic voice's self-realisation is intellectually rich. The essay's philosophical reading turns the final stanza – where the speaker claims to be 'more than the world' – into an affirmation of the power of consciousness itself: 'his consciousness, when projected upon the inert matters in "disorder" around, perceives various landforms, air, water, and wind... In assuming the role of the creator, his consciousness naturally transcends its creation.' In short, this interpretive gesture is both daring and fruitful. It demonstrates that existentialist concepts – especially those involving consciousness, embodiment, and worldhood – are not only reserved for dense prose fiction (Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir), but can indeed apply to lyric poetry. This, I believe, is the essay's most intriguing and potentially generative insight. The author should be commended for seeing this possibility and following it through with thoughtful analysis.

### **Three Areas That Require Further Clarification and Development**

While the essay's intellectual ambition is clear and admirable, there are several points where clarification, expansion, or refinement would elevate the piece to a more rigorous academic level.

#### **1. A Misalignment Between Sartrean Ontology and Existentialism**

There is a subtle but important slippage in how the paper uses Sartre. While it frequently references Being and Nothingness, it seems to conflate Sartre's ontological project with his broader existentialism. The author describes the poem as 'a precursor to Sartre's concept of human transcendence through consciousness,' and later suggests that 'this study, in essence, positions the poem as a significant lyrical harbinger of existential thinking within Victorian literature.' This is an exciting claim, but it may not be fully supported by the actual framework deployed in the essay. What the paper primarily draws upon is Sartre's ontology (the analysis of being), not his existentialism (which deals with freedom, anguish, authenticity, bad faith, etc.). The poem's speaker never quite encounters the angst or choice central to Sartre's existentialism. Nor is there much discussion of freedom or responsibility. In fact, what the paper shows is that the poem aligns with Sartre's description of how consciousness constitutes the world, but stops short of asking the existentialist question of what one does with that awareness. It would therefore be helpful for the author to distinguish more clearly between Sartre's ontology and his existentialism.

#### **Guiding Questions for the Author:**

- How might you differentiate Sartre's ontological theory of consciousness (which you have used beautifully) from his existential ethics?
- Is the speaker's realisation merely ontological (he recognises his power to constitute the world), or is it existential (he must take responsibility for it)?
- Could a more explicitly existentialist reading of the poem reveal anxieties, choices, or freedom in the speaker's position?

## **2. The In-Itself / For-Itself Distinction Needs Fuller Development**

While the paper introduces Sartre's fundamental ontological dualism – 'the "in-itself" and the "for-itself"' – the application of this framework to the poem is somewhat one-sided. The paper focuses mostly on how the speaker's for-itself (consciousness) constitutes the world, but it doesn't push as hard on what exactly in the poem corresponds to the in-itself or why that matters. For example, the landscape, wind, and rivers are said to be 'imbued with form and essence' through consciousness. But are there moments in the poem where the world resists this imposition of form? Or moments where the in-itself threatens to exceed or undermine the speaker's constitutive consciousness? The paper would benefit from probing whether the poem's depiction of the world contains any 'hardness,' 'absurdity,' or even 'facticity,' all of which are important in Sartre's account.

### **Guiding Questions for the Author:**

- Does the poem present the world as fully mastered by the speaker's consciousness, or are there moments of opacity, resistance, or strangeness?
- If everything in the poem is phenomenologically constituted by the speaker, does that flatten the world too much?
- Why do we need Sartre's distinction between in-itself and for-itself to understand the speaker's final realisation? Could another thinker of consciousness (e.g., Husserl or Merleau-Ponty) offer similar insights?

Clarifying these questions would deepen the paper's philosophical sophistication and prevent it from seeming like it 'cherry-picks' Sartrean vocabulary.

## **3. The Relation to "the World" Deserves More Nuanced Exploration**

The poem's engagement with 'the world' is central, and the essay identifies this well. However, there is a tendency to treat 'the world' as an undifferentiated, abstract entity. It might be helpful to unpack the speaker's relationship to the world with more texture. At present, the analysis concludes that: 'his consciousness enables him to recognise his bodily presence as well and evaluate that presence in the world's context.' This is a good start. But what does the poem really say about the kind of world the

speaker inhabits? Is it an ethical world? A natural one? A spiritual one? A social or political one? The fact that the poem includes references to ‘gardens,’ ‘cities,’ and ‘people’ suggests that the world is already human-shaped. In this light, the paper might also benefit from asking more open-ended questions about what ‘world’ means for Rands – and for us as readers today.

#### **Suggested Questions for Further Development:**

- What kind of world is being created in this poem? Is it one of beauty, vulnerability, grandeur, or fragility?
- What does the speaker’s desire to be ‘more than the world’ say about his values? Is this a hubristic claim, or a humble recognition of inner life?
- Does the ‘world’ respond at all to the speaker? Is there any sense of dialogue or reciprocity?
- How might a non-Sartrean reading of the ‘world’ – say, from an ecological or theological standpoint – alter the paper’s current conclusions?

Answering or even just exploring these kinds of questions could bring the paper closer to becoming a fully developed academic article.

#### **Final Thoughts**

To conclude, this is an impressive and engaging paper that succeeds on multiple fronts: it revives a neglected poem, introduces a complex philosophical framework, and produces a meaningful and novel interpretation of the speaker’s concluding assertion. Its treatment of consciousness as a poetic theme is especially memorable. However, to elevate the work to its full potential, the author could:

- Sharpen the philosophical distinctions within Sartre’s work;
- More robustly defend the utility of the in-itself/for-itself dichotomy;
- Expand the discussion of ‘the world’ to include ethical, emotional, or metaphysical dimensions.

With these additions, the paper could confidently move from the status of a ‘good essay’ to a remarkable academic article – one that could contribute meaningfully to both Victorian literary criticism and the growing field of philosophy and literature.

I look forward to seeing where this work goes next!

#### **Declarations**

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.