

Commentary

Being “More” Than the World: Rethinking Rand’s “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World”

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This essay investigates how William Brighty Rands’s poem “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World” breaks free from conventional classifications as children’s verse or nature poetry, instead prefiguring Sartre’s concept of human transcendence through consciousness. To develop this argument, the essay first explicates Sartre’s dualistic theory of being. Building on this theoretical foundation, it then demonstrates how the speaker’s contemplation of the world and his own existence leads to the realization that both are fundamentally constituted by his consciousness. This realization culminates in the conviction that his being surpasses the material world.

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I.

William Brighty Rands (1823 – 1882), also recognized under pseudonyms such as Henry Holbeach and Matthew Browne, was a prominent figure in Victorian England’s literary landscape¹. He is particularly celebrated for his contributions to children’s rhymes and is often hailed as “the laureate of the nursery”^[1]. Hugh Walker places him on par with “the two great makers of verses for children” of the time, Lewis Carroll² and R. L. Stevenson³ (qtd. in Rands^{[2][3]}).

Rands’s poetic prowess shines prominently in his later compositions, notably the lyric “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World,” featured in the 1871 collection *Lilliput Lectures*. While the book is recognized as a children’s work, designed to provide a young mind with insights into “the world outside the home” (qtd. in Rands^{[2][3]}), the poem is also regarded as attesting to the poet’s deep love for nature: “Rands had a great love for nature, and this is illustrated in his poem ‘Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World’”^[4].

Scholars have extolled the poem as an outstanding piece of literature as well. James Payn, for instance, asserts that “had [Rands] done no more than write the lyric ‘Beautiful World’... he would have claimed remembrance” (qtd. in Boase^[5]). *The Cambridge History of English Literature* acknowledges this poem as among Rands’s finest, stating, “[Rands] has nothing finer than ‘Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World’” (qtd. in Rands^{[2][3]}).

Despite these traditional interpretations and claims about the poem’s greatness, a question remains: Is the poem devoid of deeper significance? Regrettably, the absence of dedicated analyses has left this question unanswered. The present study seeks to fill that void. Beyond its apparent simplicity, as the essay will elucidate through the speaker’s reflections and eventual conclusion, “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World” captures the crucial idea of the interconnection between human consciousness and the tangible world. Through this engagement, consciousness not only projects meaning onto the world’s elements but also facilitates an individual’s transcendence of their earthly surroundings. Intriguingly, decades later, a strikingly similar idea emerges as a foundational theme of the existential ontology of the French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre⁴, particularly in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* (*L’être et le néant*, 1943). Thus, this study, in essence, positions the poem as a significant lyrical precursor in Victorian literature to 20th-century philosophical thought.

II.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre offers a compelling perspective on the dual forms of being – the “in-itself” and the “for-itself”^[6]. He describes the “in-itself” as the matter that constitutes the world^[7]. Matter encompasses all sensory objects in their inherent state. These objects are “self-contained,” immutable, and “timeless”^{[7][8]}. They embody neither “active” nor “passive” traits and exist “equally beyond affirmation [and] negation”^[6]. Their existence begins and ends within themselves. All these attributes imbue matter with positivity. However, these same properties also render it inert. Matter is incapable of relating or referring to anything external^[6]. Given that the world is composed of such matter, the world, in itself, assumes a disposition of meaninglessness and inertia.

Meaning emerges in the world through the projection of consciousness onto it. Sartre terms consciousness the “for-itself,” the second form of being. Unlike self-contained matter, consciousness lacks inherent content. It is a “nothingness,” a “void” that is “filled through” its interaction with the surrounding matter^[8], thus coming into being as the consciousness of that matter. Consequently,

consciousness depends on the world for its existence. Reciprocally, the world is conditioned by consciousness. Without consciousness, the world would not be as we recognize it. It would exist merely as a disorganized conglomeration of brute physical forms devoid of meaning, something Sartre describes as “monotonous masses” in “disorder” in his 1938 novel *Nausea*^[9]. The order, meaning, and properties of the world are contributions arising from consciousness. Therefore, the world we experience is a phenomenon shaped by our consciousness. Its reality is “a... human kind of reality”^[7].

Significantly, Sartre posits that consciousness is housed within the individual’s physical form^[10]. This embodiment of consciousness enables one to recognize one’s body and its connection to the world, thereby establishing the very features of one’s self. Consequently, Sartre draws a direct correlation between consciousness and humanity, proclaiming, “To be human is to be conscious”^[6].

Curiously, as we shall see in the subsequent section, the poem’s true significance is grounded in this dualistic theory of being.

III.

The theme of “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World” unfolds in two distinct phases. Initially, within the first three stanzas, the speaker vividly captures the world’s essence. This portrayal encompasses a variety of landscapes, water bodies, the “wind” (6)⁵, extensive cultivated lands, “gardens” (11), and human habitats. The speaker’s deep fascination with the world is evident in his⁶ use of numerous epithets to depict its vastness and diversity.

The concluding stanza marks the second phase in the poem’s thematic progression. Here, the speaker embarks on an introspective journey, juxtaposing himself against the world he has described. Through this juxtaposition, he arrives at a realization of his seeming triviality, a feeling that he conveys by likening himself to something as “small” as a “dot” (13, 17). Despite this realization, however, the speaker concludes by expressing his conviction of being “more than” (17) the world by virtue of his capacity to “love and think” (18). The conviction is articulated by a “whisper inside” him (16).

It is necessary, at first, to focus on the speaker’s sense of triviality. The speaker has a body. That makes him a part of the tangible world. The speaker’s emphasis on this aspect of the world is made apparent through his equation of “World” (1, 14) with “Earth” (9, 17, 18), the latter term denotes the former, as Bohrer stresses^[11], primarily as a “physical planet.” Delving into a reflection on his corporeal presence in

the context of the entirety of the world, the speaker discerns his diminutiveness. Hence, his self-description is someone tiny as a “dot.”

Now, to justify the speaker’s conclusion, despite acknowledging his physically negligible status, we must explore what “love and think” signifies, requiring insight into Sartre’s theory of consciousness. Sartre identifies various cognitive processes like “perception,” “conception,” “imagination,” “knowledge,” evaluation, reflection, contemplation, and the like as different “modes” or forms of consciousness^{[7][8]}. For Sartre, emotional consciousness is not a passive feeling but an active engagement with the world, a way of apprehending and responding to existence^[12]. Hence, loving – a fundamental human emotion – and thinking are both conscious acts, each embodying a dynamic relationship with external reality. The speaker’s assertion in the conclusion, therefore, serves as a metaphor for his transcendence of the world through conscious existence.

At this juncture, a crucial question arises: How does being conscious enable the speaker to transcend the world? The question requires careful examination. The world depicted in the poem is richly imbued with form and essence in every dimension. The water round it is “curled” (2); the “rivers” (10) are in a lively motion; the “air” (5) is teeming with vibrancy; and the wind breathes vitality into “trees” (6), traverses “the water” surface (7), engages in self-dialogue “on the tops of the hills” (8), and induces “wheat fields” to sway (10). The “cliffs and isles” (11) are equally permeated with life, and the valleys are donned in verdant “grass” (3). This described world, naturally, is far from the world in itself; it is a phenomenon of the speaker’s consciousness. His consciousness, when projected upon the inert matters in “disorder” around, perceives various landforms, air, water, and wind. Then, acquiring the forms of contemplation and imagination – two ways to “think” – consciousness interprets those perceived objects with a semblance of order and qualities, thereby crafting a “great,” “wide,” “beautiful,” and “wonderful” world (13, 1). In delineating the world, especially as “beautiful” or “wonderful,” however, the speaker’s consciousness also assumes the mode of “love.” It is because loving is a form of liking, and it is only out of liking for something that such epithets are applied to it. The absence of liking would bring about epithets of a very different kind. Hence, the speaker’s consciousness, through its various forms, creates the present world from that of the matters. In assuming the role of the creator, his consciousness naturally transcends its creation. Now, as the speaker is indistinguishable from his consciousness, he ascends to being “more” than the world.

Importantly, the speaker’s consciousness not only creates the poem’s world, but the sense of his physical diminutiveness is also its constitution. Like any human, his consciousness is embodied. His body is in

consciousness's immediate presence. In the process of molding the world, therefore, his consciousness enables him to recognize his bodily presence as well and evaluate that presence in the world's context. Had he lacked consciousness, no such activity would have occurred, and he would not have discovered his being "small" as a "dot." Therefore, as we might claim, the speaker's conclusion is also subtly motivated by realizing this fact about his consciousness. He becomes aware that the littleness that makes him "tremble to think of [the] World" (14) is a characteristic not immanent in his physique but one that is triggered by the workings of consciousness.

Now, because the speaker is human, his consciousness becomes symbolic of humanity's consciousness in general. Just as his consciousness contributes to shaping a meaningful world, so does the consciousness of every individual. The relationship between the world and consciousness allows for the endowment of attributes to human existence, thereby engaging individuals in meaningful actions. The culmination of all this is manifested in the poem in the "wheat fields," "gardens," and "cities" (11) teeming with "people" for "thousands of miles" (12) – each a testament to the conscious human effort in rendering the world a place fit for human habitation. Thus, the speaker's concluding assertion carries profound significance, and Rands's poem is positioned far beyond a mere children's lyric or a nature verse.

Footnotes

¹ The Victorian Era in England spanned from 1837 to 1901, during Queen Victoria's reign. Its literature is marked by an emphasis on morality, social issues, and the quest for individuality. Major poets of this period include Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Novelists like Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy produced some of the period's most significant works.

² Lewis Carroll was the pen name of the English author and mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832 – 1898). He is best known for his novels *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), which were written for children. Besides fiction, he also wrote children's poetry, including "Jabberwocky" (included in *Through the Looking-Glass*), "Humpty Dumpty's Song," "Echoes," "Little Birds," "Acrostic," and "My Fairy."

³ Robert Louis Stevenson (1850 – 1894) was a Scottish novelist, poet, and essayist of the late 19th century. He contributed significantly to children's literature, particularly through his timeless collection *A Child's*

Garden of Verses (1885). The anthology captures the innocence and wonder of childhood through vibrant imagery, playful rhythms, and accessible language.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) is widely regarded as one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. Beyond his philosophical contributions, he was also a celebrated writer and political activist. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, though he declined the honor.

⁵ Only line numbers are mentioned while referring to “Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World.”

⁶ The speaker’s gender is assumed by that of the poet.

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