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“Il n’y a pas de chats”:
Feline Absence and/as the Space of Zoopoetics

Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not. (Blanchot 325)

1. Asymptote

In 1920, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote the preface to *Mitsou*, a collection of forty black ink drawings by Balthasar Klossowski, better known as Balthus (or Baltusz), the eleven-year-old son of the artist Elizabeth “Baladine” Klossowska, who was Rilke’s lover at the time. The drawings tell the story of how young Balthus finds a stray tomcat, whom he names Mitsou. The two engage in carefree cross-species companionship, and the occasional bit of mischief, until one day Mitsou runs away and is never seen again. Balthus searches in vain for the missing cat and the final image shows him, weeping and abandoned, in his now-empty room. Rilke was so taken with these drawings that he promptly arranged for them to be published.

The rather whimsical preface, which he wrote in French, is remarkable not only as a document of Rilke’s zoopoetics, and indeed of zoopoetics more generally, but also, and this is what makes it particularly relevant to the present volume, for the way it weaves together the question of the animal and the question of language and artistic representation with the problem of the *world* or *worlds* inhabited by humans and nonhumans. In this way, the text may serve as an invitation to consider how zoopoetics and eco-poetics—conceived as creative, multispecies engagements with more-than-human forms of life and the environments in which “we” dwell—are unavoidably and productively entangled.

The preface begins as follows: “Does anyone know cats? Do you, for example, think that you do? I must admit that I have never considered their existence to be more than a fairly bold hypothesis” (9).¹ In order for animals

¹ There are, to my knowledge, three published translations of this text into English—by Richard Miller, Stephen Mitchell, and Damion Searls, respectively. I have opted to refer

to “share our world,” he continues, they must somehow “participate in it,” if only a little. Dogs, for instance, appear to inhabit a world related to our own, a fact which is evident in the determination with which they acknowledge our presence, even if it forces them to live “at the very limits of their nature” to the point that they appear to have “abandoned their most primal canine traditions” in favor of seeking admittance into our world. This is what makes them “tragic and sublime” (9). Dogs, Rilke feels, are always on the cusp of leaving their canine world behind completely and joining us in ours, at which point they would cease to be dogs altogether.

Cats, by contrast, are simply cats, and they show no ambition to become anything else, least of all for our sake: “Their world is utterly, through and through, a cat’s world” (9). What is more, there is no overlap between this feline world and the world of men. Certain individuals, Rilke grants, are occasionally admitted into the presence of cats, but even these fortunate ones will inevitably find themselves “rejected and denied,” banned from entering the cats’ world, “a world which they inhabit exclusively, surrounded by circumstances that none of us can ever guess” (10). Hence, even if you think your cat is looking at you—in the morning, in the bathroom, say—in fact you cannot be certain that she has ever truly deigned to register your “futile image” on the surface of her retina. If there is any reciprocity in this relationship, it lies in the fact that cats seem to find our existence equally implausible as Rilke does theirs:

Has man ever been their contemporary? I doubt it. And I can assure you that sometimes, in the twilight, the cat next door pounces across and through my body [*à travers mon corps*], either unaware of me or to prove to the dumbfounded things [*choses ahuries*] that I really don’t exist. (10)

The preface as a whole is written in the spirit of consolation for the loss of the kitten. This consolation proceeds along two separate and seemingly irreconcilable lines of argument, both of which concern the impossibility of losing a cat: On the one hand, Rilke implies that the reason you cannot really lose a cat is that, in fact, cats do not exist, and hence it is impossible ever to have found one in the first place. Interestingly, this form of consola-

to Miller’s translation, which is the most fluent. This is in part because it is freer than the other two, which also unfortunately makes it somewhat inaccurate in places. Miller inexplicably changes Mitsou’s gender from male to female, for instance, and there are various other idiosyncrasies in the text. I have thus taken the liberty of silently amending or modifying it in order to preserve a specific nuance, supplying the original French wherever necessary.

tion is aimed not at young Balthus, who, in producing these forty drawings, has evidently been able to work through his loss and thus “fulfilled [his] obligation” to the absent feline; rather, it is the *reader*, whose final image of Balthus remains that of the forlorn child, “bathed in tears at the end of [the] book,” who must be reassured. Thus, the preface concludes on the following enigmatic note: “Don’t worry: I am [*je suis*]. Baltusz exists. Our world is sound. // There are no cats [*il n’y a pas de chats*]” (13).

On the other hand, Rilke writes that even if you do find a cat—which would imply that there are, in fact, cats to be found, even if, as he puts it, finding a cat is “unheard of” (12)—owing to the asymptotic noncontemporaneity of the human and feline worlds, a cat never truly becomes part of your life, and hence it was never *your* cat to lose in the first place. Instead, the relationship between owner and cat can only be expressed in the irreducible formula “life + a cat”, a formula which, Rilke writes, “adds up to an incalculable sum” (12). It produces a surplus which persists even once one has lost the cat again, and which renders that loss impossible. This surplus, this palpable absence, is what Balthus has transformed into his forty drawings:

No one has ever lost a cat. *Can* one lose a cat, a living thing, a living being, a life? But to lose a life: is death [*c’est la mort!*] . . .
 Finding, losing. Have you really thought what loss is? . . . [L]oss, cruel though it may be, cannot prevail over possession; it can, if you like, terminate it; it affirms it; in the end it is like a second acquisition, but this time wholly internal, intense in a different way.
 Of course, you felt this, Baltusz. No longer seeing Mitsou, you set about seeing him even more.
 Is he still alive? He lives within you, and his insouciant kitten’s frolics that once diverted you now compel you: you fulfilled your obligation through your laborious sorrow. (12-13)

This “laborious sorrow” is a poetic response to the absence, to the loss of the other, which is always singular and irreplaceable, and whose death, to quote Jacques Derrida, marks not just the end of *a* world or of someone in the world, but “each time singularly,” “irreplaceably,” “infinitely,” and “in defiance of arithmetic”—an “incalculable sum” indeed!—the absolute “end of *the* world” (“Rams” 140). This casts Rilke’s reassurance that “our world is sound” in a somewhat different light, since this *world* is no longer the same as it was before Balthus found the cat, and neither is the “we” whose world is now declared sound. The soundness and solidity of “our” world is something that must be *produced*, in the face of feline absence, through the work of mourning.

Even though the cat was never fully part of our world, its absence leaves behind “a gap in the world,” to borrow a phrase from D. H. Lawrence’s “Mountain Lion,” which is itself a roughly contemporary rumination on feline absence. Nor is it the only text from this period in which feline absence—both literal and figurative, actual and hypothetical—plays a central role. It seems everywhere you look, cats are not there. This “gap” might be regarded as the space of zoopoetics, particularly since, as we shall see, this palpable absence begins to serve as a sort of master trope for engagements with fundamental questions regarding the relationship between word and world. As such, it mediates between the three key terms that animate the present volume, namely texts, animals, and environments.

2. Casual²

In 1939, Gertrude Stein published a book, ostensibly for children, entitled *The World Is Round*. It is about a girl named, inevitably, Rose, who has a dog named Love and a cousin named Willie, who has a lion named Billie. Chapter eight, entitled “Rose Thinking,” consists of a single sentence: “If the world is round would a lion fall off” (25). This enigmatic and rather whimsical thought raises many questions, but I will limit myself to the following: the absence of a question mark, here as elsewhere in the text, makes it ambiguous how this sentence is to be read, and this ambiguity also begins to trouble the constative force of the book’s title, inviting us to ask whether the world really *is* round, whether this is not to conflate the world with the earth, say. But if the world *isn’t* round, what then? Relatedly, perhaps thinking back to Rilke’s take on the issue, we might also question the use of the definite article: is there such a thing as *the* world? Furthermore, how are we to interpret the abrupt shift from the indicative (“is”) to the subjunctive (“would”)? And finally, 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’s start 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 the poem “Sacred Emily” (*Geography* 187). Like many poets of her generation, Stein felt that words had become worn out and had lost their immediacy, so that now, as she would later put it, when you read or write a

² A version of this section was previously published under the heading “World,” in the volume *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition*.

poem about roses, “you know in your bones that the rose is not *there*” (Four vi). The formula was an attempt to reassert the *thingness* of words, and hence to minimize the distance between the word and the world. Oddly, while we are assured at the beginning of *The World Is Round* that “Rose is a rose” and that she “would have been Rose” (1) by any other name as well, her cousin Willie’s identity is less secure. Seemingly, this has something to do with his lion, who has “a name as well as a mane and that name is Billie” (27). Not only are the two names so similar as to invite confusion, neither name seems to correspond to its bearer’s inmost identity. This prompts Rose to ask herself: “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, around the same time Ludwig Wittgenstein was also worrying about the proposition “Lion is a lion” and what it meant for the place of cats in the world. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—published, as it happens, in 1922, like “Sacred Emily”—Wittgenstein had famously defined the world as “everything that is the case [*der Fall*]” (31) but in his notes from the year 1944, he was moved to revise this definition, seemingly on account of the lion.³ According to the *Tractatus*, a statement can have sense only if it represents a state of affairs, i.e., something which is “the case.” Thus any and all statements about fictional lions—in fables, for instance—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*. 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, Wittgenstein writes, we encounter *the* lion, not *a* lion, nor a particular lion named Lion, and thus “it actually is as if the species lion came to be seen as a lion” (*Remarks* 182). 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—and hence there is no way to ascertain how many lions there are at any given moment. 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. “One can examine an animal to see if it is a cat,” he writes, “but at any rate the concept

³ My reading here is indebted to Hans Blumenberg’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s “retraction” in *Lions* (56-61).

‘cat’ cannot be examined in this way” (182). Hence, whereas in 1922 he would have regarded the proposition that “the class of cats is not a cat” as sheer nonsense, now he asks, simply: “How do you know?” (182). How, in other words, would one *verify* such a statement? Even though it “seems like nonsense,” Wittgenstein argues that it can be read as a “proper sentence, if only it is taken right,” i.e., as a language game involving a different kind of certainty than mathematical certainty.

For Wittgenstein, then, the ultimate aim is to re-evaluate the problem of certainty, and hence it may seem like little more than a happy coincidence that he ends up saving the fabular lion from oblivion in the process. Nevertheless, it does seem as though the threat of feline (or, more precisely, leonine) absence was enough to make this most rigorous of philosophers re-evaluate one of the core premises of his philosophy and change his definition of “the world.”⁴ From a zoopoetic perspective, this has far-reaching consequences (“if only it is taken right”), and I should like to take it as an argument *for literature* as a means of expanding “the world” beyond whatever happens or appears to be “the case.”

3. Exorbitant

At a conference in Berlin some years ago, Jonathan Burt remarked that animal figures in art are frequently endowed with an “exorbitant potential,” which is not exhausted by the philosophical and conceptual gestures that accompany them. I find this a particularly apt term for thinking about the way in which animals, and cats in particular, gesture always beyond the text in a way that renders their absence maximally significant.

Probably the most concise articulation of this mode of absence is to be found in Jorge Luis Borges’ poem “El otro tigre” (“The Other Tiger,” 1959), which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Driscoll, “Fearful Symmetries”), so I will merely summarize some key points here. The poem opens with the speaker imagining a tiger prowling through the jungle, leaving “its

⁴ Indeed, we must not forget that it was also in the context of certainty and its relation to the language game that just a couple of years later, in 1947, Wittgenstein would make his enigmatic postulation that “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (*PI* 223e). The double subjunctive is key here: the sentence does not refer to a verifiable “state of affairs” at all. If anything, we are being asked not only to imagine a world in which lions can talk, but also to confront the limits of our (human, linguistic) understanding and ability to respond.

footprint on the muddy edge / of a river with a name unknown to it”—for “in its world, there are no names” (Borges 6-8). By the beginning of the second stanza, however, he begins to realize that this tiger is nothing more than “a set of literary images” and “scraps remembered from encyclopedias” (24-26). Far from following its own path “out of reach of all mythologies” (45) the tiger is bound to a path that is always already circumscribed by language. Against this “tiger of symbols” (31) the speaker posits the real, “hot-blooded” (32) tiger—but in so doing, in *naming* this “real” tiger and attempting to guess “its nature and its circumstance” (37), it too becomes “a fiction, not a living creature” (38). Thus, in the third and final stanza, the poet resolves to continue his search for “the other tiger, the one not in this poem” (49), even though he knows that this “third tiger” (40) will also be a figment of his imagination, an “arrangement of human language” (42). The tiger on the page is always a paper tiger—an *animot*—but the “real” tiger which exists only outside the text is itself also a function of the discourse that enframes it.

The same of course also goes for what is undoubtedly the most famous cat in all of animal studies, namely Derrida’s cat from *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. As the reader will recall, Derrida spends several pages near the beginning of his text insisting that he is talking about “a real cat”: “truly, believe me, *a little cat*,” not “the *figure* of a cat” (6), and certainly not any of a whole litany of famous literary and philosophical cats, from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tomcat Murr (6) to “Montaigne’s cat” (6) to “Baudelaire’s family of cats” (7), to Rilke’s cats (7), and so forth. But of course, as Derrida knows only too well, he doth protest too much. All the insistent deictic specificity he can muster (“she and no other, the one *I am talking about here*”) is not enough to isolate *this* cat from all the others, and nor can he change the irrefragable fact that *there is no “real cat” in the text*. At the same time, he is right to insist that the cat is not *just* a metaphor, or an “ambassador” for “the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race” (9). Yet, this “symbolic responsibility” cannot be so easily shrugged off. The mere fact that Derrida feels the need to go to such great lengths to specify all the cats that he is *not* talking about in order to insist on the “unsubstitutable singularity” (9) of “his” cat is itself an indication of the inherent difficulty of stripping away the intertextual associations and significances attached to the chimerical material-semiotic assemblage that is “Derrida’s cat.”

This might be a good time to recall that “the exorbitant” is also the term Derrida uses in *Of Grammatology* when discussing the question of deconstructive method, and it is in this context that we find his (in)famous assertion

that “there is nothing outside of the text (there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*)” (158). From this perspective, the “exorbitant” seems to offer a space within the discourse—or rather, it holds out the promise that such a space could and must be produced—from which that discourse might be deconstructed. The exorbitant names a position within the discourse that resists its totalizing order while also avoiding the trap of presuming that there is a transcendental, extra-textual position from which to pass judgement: the exorbitant reading “cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent . . . outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language” (158). Although Derrida is referring to practices of reading and interpretation here, the same is true for representation and writing, not least for zoopoetic writing: Borges’ search for the “other tiger” must end in failure, but it is a productive failure, in that it ceaselessly pursues the outer limit of the representable and expressible. In this way, the “exorbitant” tiger is precisely that which exceeds or occupies a position “a little bit outside” (Rilke 12) the *orbis*, which designates not only a track or path (*orbis*), but the rotation of the Earth and, by extension, the world as a whole (*orbis terrarum*). In other words, Borges’ tiger, like Willie’s lion, is exorbitant and hence always in danger of “falling off.” It is poetry that seeks to negotiate a space *inside* language that could encompass this exorbitant potential in a way that also expands the boundaries of the world.

Animality is constructed as that which is perennially outside language: it is the ultimate *hors-texte*. Hence we might say that the text is marked by an absence that is shaped like an animal—a cat, for instance. And perhaps we can begin to see *Il n’y a pas de chats* as a version of *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*. The cats and the *hors-texte* occupy an analogous position in each statement, and, indeed, fulfil a similar function, in terms of both representation and interpretation. This is important to keep in mind for scholars working in literary animal studies, since, again, *there are no cats* in the texts we study. But this needn’t be seen as a lack, or as proof that the cat isn’t “there,” since that in turn would serve to reinforce the entire logocentric tradition that depends on the exclusion of the animal. But nor can we simply conjure up the animal or claim that we are studying or speaking for the animals themselves. Instead, we have to be attentive to the gaps and spaces left behind by the feline absences in the text, which also includes the myriad ways cats and other animals have traditionally been “interpreted out” of texts by literary scholarship. Indeed, as Derrida insists, the task would be to arrive at “a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the

absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation” (*Animal* 48).

4. Effaniniffable

The naming of cats, as is well known, is a difficult matter. In his celebrated poem on the subject—published, as it happens, in 1939, the same year as *The World Is Round*—T. S. Eliot explains that “a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES” (4): one for everyday family use; one “that’s peculiar, and more dignified” (14), such as “Munustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat” (18), which never belongs to more than one cat; and finally a secret third name, which “you never will guess; / The name that no human research can discover— / But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess” (22-24). Whereas the first name is that given to the cat by his or her human companions, it is not yet a *proper* name, since there may be any number of cats by the name of “Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James.” The second name, by contrast, refers only to one particular cat, and as such comes closer to being “proper” to that cat, but, as is the nature of names, this name too will survive the cat and hence pre-ordains the cat’s inevitable disappearance. Only the third name can truly be said to belong to the cat, to correspond wholly and without remainder to his innermost essence, his true identity, but this is possible only the condition that it remain unspoken, unknowable, *secret*.

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
 The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
 His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
 Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
 His ineffable effable
 Effanineffable
 Deep and inscrutable singular Name. (25-31)

Evidently, keeping this secret requires significant mental effort on the part of the cat, as if his very existence depended on it. This secret is a source of fascination and—depending on how we choose to interpret the first two syllables of “effanineffable”—frustration for the poet, who finds himself barred from entering this private realm, much in the same way as Rilke is shut out from the feline world. The upshot of this circumstance is that whatever we may choose to call any particular cat, this name will never truly correspond to the cat himself. Moreover, in order to preserve the secret, the cat cannot answer to his *true* name, either, lest he let the cat out of the bag, as it were,

and invalidate this name whose essence “is” its secrecy. As a secret, then, it is “without content,” to quote Derrida, “without a content separable from its performative experience, from its performative tracing” (“Passions” 24); in order to remain “proper,” this name is subject to indefinite deferral, and, hence, *différance*. This name is thus precisely not a proper name, which would always already be improper, subject to the differential play of the trace; rather, it is the *absence* of the name—that is its secret, and this, too, is a species of feline absence.

If there is a zoopoetic force to Eliot’s poem—if, that is, we are to regard it as something more than idle, childish, and finally anthropocentric musing on a rather domesticated brand of alterity—it lies in the way the repeated insistence on the “thought” of this inscrutable name gestures towards the sort of “fabulous and chimerical” thinking that Derrida calls for in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, an animal thinking “that thinks the absence of the name” as “something other than a privation” (48).

How, in this context, might we interpret the nonce word “effanineffable”? Is it just a playful reduplication of the previous line? “Ineffable” may denote either an inability or a prohibition to speak, and derives—like the word “fable,” incidentally—from the verb *fāri*, “to utter.” “Effanineffable” appears almost as a synthesis or sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the terms “effable” and “ineffable,” both of which are applied to the cat’s third name, which would thus be *both* utterable *and* unutterable at the same time. In this sense, its functioning would be analogous to *khōra*, a “third genus” which names that which cannot be named and disrupts the logic of binary oppositions: it appears at times to be “neither this nor that, at times both this and that,” oscillating between “the logic of exclusion and that of participation” but belonging to neither—and/or to both (Derrida, “Khōra” 89). The third name would thus be both/neither utterable n/or unutterable, both/neither *absent* n/or *present*. Like Rilke’s cats, it is both “there” and “not there,” remaining always “a little bit outside” [*il reste un peu en dehors*; or: “there is always a little bit left over”] (Rilke 12).

Although *khōra* appears to function like a proper name, it does not, in fact, refer to a given entity; rather, it appears to denote, among other things, a *space* or a *place*, and more specifically an interstitial space between entities—an abyssal limit—and, moreover, that which “gives place” to those entities and their actions while simultaneously serving as a container or receptacle for them. In order to capture this ambiguity, in his discussion of the term, Derrida refers to *khōra* as a *mi-lieu* (116), a half-place, a place that is half-way—but of course *milieu* also means “environment,” which we might now

be in a position to think of as not only the setting for an encounter between animality and textuality but more fundamentally as that which “gives place” to that encounter. It is, if I may be permitted to speak in such terms, the “y” in *il n’y a pas de chats*.

5. Irresponsible

One of the most surprising, indeed alarming, moments in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* comes in the middle of the aforementioned passage in which Derrida enumerates all the various literary and philosophical cats that he is not talking about. Having just assured his listeners that his singular cat is also definitely *not* the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, Derrida adds that, if they want, they can choose to hear his “emphasis on ‘really a little cat’ as a quote from chapter 11 of *Through the Looking Glass*,” which—much like chapter eight of *The World Is Round*—consists of a single sentence: “it really *was* a kitten after all” (Carroll 205; Derrida, *Animal* 7). Derrida goes on to say that if he had time to do so, he would of course have liked to “inscribe [his] whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll.” And then, more alarmingly still, he adds: “In fact you can’t be certain that I am not doing that, for better or for worse, silently, unconsciously, or without your knowing” (7). What in the world are we to make of this? Is he really talking about his cat or isn’t he?

Let us recall that Derrida’s approach to the question of the animal revolves around the supposed inability of animals to *respond* in the proper sense of the word. Alice’s frustration with her kittens concerns the monotony of their responses to her questions: “How *can* you talk with a person if they *always* say the same thing?” (Carroll 206; Derrida, *Animal* 8). But what is it that Alice wants to know? Having awoken from her dream to discover that the Red Queen “really *was* a kitten after all,” Alice sets about trying to determine first of all who or what, in the real world, corresponds to the strange cast of characters she had encountered in the heterotopia on the other side of the mirror. This proves difficult, and so she demands that the kitten “confess” (206) to having turned into the Red Queen. But since the kitten only purrs, it is impossible for Alice to know for certain, and quickly her allegorical reading of the text begins to unravel, to the point when she isn’t sure whether it was she who dreamed it all, or whether they had all been trapped inside the dream of the Red King, whose true identity, moreover, remains a mystery. It is not too difficult to discern in Alice’s insistent questioning an

analogue to a certain mode of literary criticism, in which the critic demands to know what the cat “really” stands for. And then, when the cat invariably refuses to spill the beans, this is chalked up to an inability on the animal’s part. This, in turn, serves only to reaffirm the assurance that it “really *was* a kitten after all”—since the defining characteristic of kittens is that they do not respond.

Importantly, as Derrida notes at the beginning of the second part of his lecture, this basic irresponsibility aligns the kitten with writing in general, and literature in particular:

What is terrible (*dénon*) about writing, Socrates says, is the fact that, like painting (*zōgraphia*), the things it engenders, although similar to living things (*ōs zōnta*), do not respond. No matter what question one asks them, writings remain silent, keeping a most majestic silence or else always replying in the same terms, which means not replying. (*Animal* 52; cf. *Dissemination* 136; *Phaed.* 275d)

In other words, kittens are (like) texts: they always say the same thing. Derrida does not dispute this. It is not, after all, “a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals.” Rather, it is a matter of recognizing, as Derrida writes elsewhere, that nonresponse is itself a response: “One always has, one always must have, the right not to respond, and this liberty belongs to responsibility itself” (“Passions” 17). For Derrida, it is *literature* as an institution that guarantees, in principle, both “the right to say everything” (28) and simultaneously the right to “absolute nonresponse” (29), to a fundamental “irresponsibility,” whereby an author cannot be forced to answer for the things the characters in his works say and do. (To paraphrase Chaucer: “Thise been the cattes wordes, and nat myne.”) More strongly, Derrida suggests that there may even be a fundamental “duty of irresponsibility, a refusal to reply” to an authority, and that this is “perhaps the highest form of responsibility” (“Strange” 38).

Perhaps, then, by suggesting that he may in fact, secretly or unconsciously, be talking about *Through the Looking Glass* when it seems as though he is talking about *this particular cat*, Derrida is in fact refusing to accept responsibility for the significance of his own text. After all, you can examine an animal to see if it is a cat—and even whether it is this or that particular cat—but you certainly cannot do the same for the cat in Derrida’s text. At the same time, in turning the decision regarding how to “hear” (*entendre*, also: understand) his speech over to his audience, in an elaborate form of epitrope, he is also challenging *us* to respond. The singularity of this cat becomes the singularity of literature. We must confront the possibility that we do not know what it means to “respond”—least of all to a nonhuman who does not speak. If

a cat could speak we would not understand her. It may, above all, be not only necessary but quite literally productive, from both a zoopoetic and an eco-poetic perspective, to affirm the constitutive inadequacy of any response we may be able to offer to the call of the other, which, as Derrida elsewhere reminds us, “is a call to come, and that happens only in multiple voices” (“Psyche” 47), not all of which, we hasten to add, are human.

In her discussion of what she calls “negative eco-poetics,” Kate Rigby notes that the recognition of the inadequacy of our response to the call of the more-than-human other “necessitates and affirms a plurality of voices. For if no one can say it all, then we are all called upon to participate in our own way in the ‘chorus and polyphony’ of responses,” which, moreover, “contains more than human voices, for which we ourselves cannot stand in” (438-39). “Only by insisting on the limits of the text,” she continues, “its inevitable falling-short as a mode of response no less than as an attempted mediation, can we affirm that there is, in the end, no substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world in those places where we ourselves stray, tarry, and, if we are lucky, dwell” (440).

6. Subjunctive

The word “world” and its cognates (*Welt*, *wereld*, *veröld*) derives from the Proto-Germanic root *wer*, meaning “man” (still present in words like “were-wolf” and “virile”), and *-ald*, meaning “age” (still present in “old”). Literally, then, “world” means “age of man”—hence one might say that there is no need for the concept of the Anthropocene, as it is already implicit in “world,” both in terms of its anthropocentrism and, more interestingly, in the fact that it denotes a time rather than a place. As has been pointed out, the term “Anthropocene” is nonsensical both etymologically and conceptually: if Holocene means “wholly recent,” Anthropocene must mean something like “human-recent”; moreover, as Dana Luciano observes, “the decision to bring this epoch [the Holocene] to an end would mark the present as a peculiar time, *after the recent*, a time out of time in more than one sense” (n. pag.). The time is not just 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 time and space with other creatures and 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. I would like to suggest that one of the main tasks facing both zoopoetics and eco-poetics is to interrogate the interstices of these two senses of “world”—as something that is simply *there* but that at the same time cannot simply be taken for granted, something that we must actively work to produce, at least if we want to conceive of the world as something we have *in common* with other forms of life on this planet.

Perhaps this may help us to understand the enigmatic shift from the indicative to the subjunctive in Rose’s question: “If the world is round, would a lion fall off?” In his lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger notoriously posited that “the animal is poor in world,” in contrast to man, who is “world-forming” (177). For Heidegger, the animal’s mode of being-in-the-world is not a being-*there* (*Da-sein*), because, he claims, the animal does not have a relation to the world *as such*. To which Wittgenstein might quite reasonably respond, “How do you know?” And, conversely, as Derrida asks at the end of *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, how do you know that man has a relation to the world “as such” (160)? Is there even such a thing as the world *as such*? Do humans and nonhumans inhabit the same world, or is there a separate world for cats, for example, that is entirely separate from the world inhabited by humans? In his final seminar, Derrida proposes three seemingly incompatible answers to this question: On the one hand, he says, incontestably, humans and animal do inhabit the same world, the same physical space. On the other hand, and equally incontestably, animals and humans do *not* inhabit the same world, “for the human world will never be purely and simply identical to the world of animals” (*Beast* 8). Ultimately, however, neither answer is satisfactory, for, Derrida insists, neither the unity nor disunity of the world or worlds is simply “natural” (8); both are in fact constructs, and *any* community of worlds, whether between humans or nonhumans or both, must first seek to overcome the gap, the unbridgeable space “between my world and any other world.” In fact, Derrida writes, “[t]here is no world, there are only islands” [*Il n’y a pas de monde, il n’y a que des îles*] (9). And yet, we carry on “*as if* we were inhabiting the same world” (268). This *as if*, which brings the world into the world, is an act of *poiesis*: “[W]hat I must do, with you and carrying you, is make it that there be precisely a world, just a world, . . . as cats, to make *as if* there were just a world, . . . as though there ought to be a world where presently there is none, to make the gift or present of this *as if* come up poetically” (268). Thus, as Michael

Naas comments, 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*” (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. Perhaps the prerogative of “world-forming” can thus be reinterpreted as an obligation, a joint venture, which necessarily involves both humans and nonhumans in the shared co-creation of the world. Such an undertaking would thus be both *zoo-* and *eco-poetic*. *Il n’y a pas de monde* is itself a version of *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, and hence of *Il n’y a pas de chats*. Which is to say, there is nothing that is simply “the case.” The subjunctive is all; the world is something we must create. We carry on *as if* there were a world, just as we proceed *as if* there were cats. Only then can “our” world be sound.

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